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Identity Transformation through Dialogue

A Case Study of Student Video Messages Exchange in Russia-Ukraine Conflict

University of Tampere

Master's Degree Programme in Peace, Mediation and Conflict Research

Master's thesis

May 2018

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Introduction

After gaining the independence in 1991, along with the legacy of historic, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences among regions, Ukraine inherited unfinished process of nation and identity building. Throughout the history, the inhabitants of the Eastern regions had more experience of living under the Russian flag, of speaking Russian as the only means of communication and sharing Russian culture and historical narrative. Unlike the Western regions, the East had no tradition of Ukrainian nationalist movement, did not praised the Ukrainian language as the core of Ukrainian identity, and had never experienced the influence of any other foreign cultures apart from Russian. While the Western Ukrainians exalted the heroes of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which got support from Nazi Germany in their struggle for independence and against the communist regime, the Eastern Ukrainians shared with Russia the narrative of the united army of Soviet citizens protecting their Motherland.

The status quo between the two identities destabilized in 2014. A peaceful protest against the unfavorable regime ended up with mass riots followed with the ouster of the president. Russia took the opportunity to involve into the internal affairs of the unstable state and regained Crimea, the territory they believed to be lost due to a historical mistake. Moreover, the Eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk were supported in their struggle for independence, which has led to the escalation of the military conflict in weakened Ukraine.

The new Ukrainian government, which gained a vast support of the population, has chosen a new nationalization course. Although this course is believed to have united the citizens against the common enemy, the discrepancy between the two identities has grown. While the most part of the population developed their identity on the basis of the Western national symbols, culture and the Ukrainian language in the core, the other part has suffered greater alienation from the mainstream discourse. The Russian language, culture, and identity have become closely bound with authoritarianism, the Soviet past, and the aggressor country.

At the same time, Russia has started to promote their view of the impoverished Eastern-Ukrainian identity. The new discourse of the Russian world developed in Kremlin brought up the new interpretation to the identity agenda. It was claimed that the citizens of now independent states of Russian and Ukraine shared common traditions, mentality, history and

culture. Inside Russia and in the areas of Eastern Ukraine where Russian television became dominant, the Kremlin's political technologists have managed to construct an alternative reality, where the new Ukrainian government is depicted as nationalist and the ethnic Russians in Ukraine are oppressed and endangered.

As result, we have the same two identities in Ukraine, but instead of peaceful coexistence, they became the representations of two antagonistic societies at war. Same historical events and personalities are presented in conflicting ways, leading to construction of inconsistency and escalation of hate. Russia continues to challenge the vague boundary between Russian and Ukrainian identities, undermining the basic right of the Ukrainian nation and state to existence, while the new official discourse of the Ukrainian government is aimed at alienating the Ukrainian identity from Russia in order to distinguish its uniqueness and independence.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine serves as a vivid example of how the state acts as one of the most influential agents of external identification. At this point it is crucial to note that even the state does not monopolize the production identity. Such inevitable parts of identity as national symbols, historical narratives and language are the objects of mental representations, and thus they can be contested and deconstructed. If the struggle over identity has become a natural part of a conflict, the violence can be stopped in the realm of narratives and interpretations.

There are different points of view even to how this conflict can be defined. The official Ukrainian position claims that it is either undeclared war with Russia, or the war against separatists and terrorists in the Eastern regions. The alternative approach defines the conflict as a civil war. Given the proofs of direct Russian military involvement, and, at the same time, the fact that the conflict is taking place on Ukrainian territory with Ukrainian citizens (or former Ukrainian citizens belonging to the new unrecognized republics – it is the matter of political preferences, and I am not taking either side in this research), I hereafter will address this conflict as Ukraine-Russia conflict. However, by this definition I do not mean a war between Ukraine and Russia, as it has more features of a civil war than a war between two states, but the decisive role of Russia in generating the conflict is beyond question. Thus, by calling it a Ukraine-Russia conflict, I primarily mean the clash between the two states in the

realm of constructing and interpreting the Ukrainian identity and building conflicting narratives, and not the military confrontation.

At this point I argue that the violence in Ukraine-Russia conflict is produced by the antagonistic narratives about identity, history and the present. Hence, I believe the conflict transformation framework can be the most appropriate approach to stop the violence. The possibility for antagonistic societies to express and hear alternative narratives without fueling violence is a prerequisite for sustainable peace. Conflict transformation provides such possibility through dialogue.

Within the framework of conflict transformation, dialogue is mainly aimed at “deconstruction of enemy images and narrative and construction of shared meanings and narratives.” Dialogue is the necessary link from antagonism to agonism. Using dialogue in peace-making process is unique inherent part of conflict transformation and reconciliation, which abstract it from other conflict resolution practices. When dialogue is understood as an act of sharing, it contributes to changing the vision of the other as the enemy, building enduring structures, where different societies are able to coexist peacefully. However, it is crucial that dialogue as part of conflict transformation process is not focused on studying identity itself, but it should look at identification. Researching the processes of perception and categorization should be the core element of peaceful dialogue. The shift from identities to identification, from narratives to their construction and execution, from those who carry identity to those who cultivate it must be in the center of conflict transformation.

Simple discussion and exchange of views can result in deeper understanding of antagonist picture of the world and enriching views of the matter that is initially in controversy. The aim of dialogue is not to find who is right and who is wrong or whose interpretation of the truth has more right to exist, but to overcome misunderstanding, a failure of communication, a clash of values, and a collision of equally valid interests. The aim is to discover that interpretations, goals and directions might be different, but equally essential and valuable.

Given that both sides of the Ukraine-Russia conflict represent aggressive antagonistic narratives and actively use historical myths and propaganda to promote these narratives, the whole notion of the truth disappears in the often-contradictory media reports from both

warring parties, while the observers, not having the direct access to the battleground, can only repeat and multiply the information provided by the propaganda machines. A possible facilitation of the situation could be achieved through the direct grassroots dialogue between the warring societies. Thus, the main research question of this work is how can the dialogue at the grassroots level contribute to the transformation of identity-based conflict in Ukraine?

The answer can be found in a case-study of the video exchange between Ukrainian and Russian students in winter of 2015. The analysis will be aimed at exploring what language and terminology the speakers use, what symbols and myths they refer to, and, hence, what identity they represent. In case of the video messages, released by the Russian students, the question of identity does not matter. The research will be focused on the identity represented by the Western Ukrainian students, and by their colleagues from Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. The main question for the Western videos is whether they represent the official political discourse of their state, or are there signs of their disagreement with their government and expression of their personal point of view. For the Eastern videos it is interesting to see what identity they represent. Is it the so-called Eastern-Ukrainian identity, the Russian identity, or something different and distinctive? For Crimean videos the main question is if there are any signs of any type of Ukrainian identity represented, or do the speakers identify themselves only as Russians. As it is hardly possible to track how the exchange of video messages has contributed to the participants' perception of each other, and how their self-identification has transformed through expressing their own opinions and listening to alternative ones, the main focus will be put on what potential such dialogue can have in conflict transformation.

The work consists of three major parts. The first part includes the introduction into the identity studies and the representation of the identity situation in Ukraine, its historical retrospective and recent developments after 2014. The second part includes the introduction into the conflict transformation and dialogue discourse, highlighting the importance of the grassroots dialogue in the Ukraine-Russia conflict transformation. The third part forms the case study of the attempt undertaken by Ukrainian and Russian students to build a direct dialogue using the exchange of video messages on Youtube.

1. Identity

1.1. Introduction into Identity studies

1.1.1. Identity and identification

Although the term “identity” is widely used in contemporary politics practices, application of this term in research must avoid treating it as a concept, which all people have, seek, construct, and negotiate. In general, identity can be understood from two different perspectives: as a category of practice and as a category of analysis. From practical angle, “it is used by “lay” actors in some everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from, others. It is also used by political entrepreneurs to persuade people to understand themselves, their interests, and their predicaments in a certain way, to persuade certain people that they are (for certain purposes) “identical” with one another and at the same time different from others, and to organize and justify collective action along certain lines.”¹ The researchers in identity studies should not take the existence of identity for granted, but focus on critical analysis of “the processes and mechanisms through which what has been called the «political fiction» of «identity» can crystallize, at certain moments, as a powerful, compelling reality.”²

There are several approaches to understanding identity. First, if identity is understood as a basis of social or political action, it is often put in opposition to interest. It is hence used to shift the motivation of certain actions and decisions from simple self-interest to comprehensive self-understandings. Second, if identity is approached through the prism of collective phenomenon, it “denotes a fundamental and consequential sameness among members of a group or category. This may be understood objectively (as a sameness «in itself») or subjectively (as an experienced, felt, or perceived sameness). This sameness is expected to manifest itself in solidarity, in shared dispositions or consciousness, or in collective action.”³ The third approach comes from studying identity as a core of individual or collective self-understanding. Here it acts as a natural part of social being coming from

¹ Brubaker, Cooper, 2000, p.5.

² *ibid*, p.5.

³ *ibid*, p.7.

“something allegedly deep, basic, abiding, or foundational” and is expected to be “valued, cultivated, supported, recognized, and preserved.”⁴ This list of understandings is not excessive, as it can also include, for instance, identity as “a product of social or political action”, or as “the evanescent product of multiple and competing discourses” and other approaches introduced by Brubaker.⁵

Along with such notions as ethnic, national or racial groups, the tendency to reify identity can be put in the field that Brubaker named as groupism. He suggests applying this term to all the processes aimed at representing different groups as something self-evidently existing and using them as given in social, cultural and political discourses. Thus, in order to avoid this tendency of groupism, identity-based conflicts should not be understood as conflicts between groups with different identities. The research on such phenomena as ethnicity, race, nation, or identity must be done through analysis of the contiguous notions, i.e. “practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organizational routines, institutional forms, political projects and contingent events.”⁶ This also includes the analysis of the “processes through which [categories] become institutionalized and entrenched in administrative routines”⁷ and “embedded in culturally powerful and symbolically resonant myths, memories and narratives.”⁸

Struggle over labelling, interpreting and explaining different events and parties is an inevitable integral part of modern violent conflicts. Such “conflict[s] over the nature of the conflict”⁹ can play a key role in production of violence and have important impacts. Identity framing in this sense is often used by warring parties as a tool of justification and legitimization of their decisions. The official institutionalization of national identity does not represent the perception or self-understanding of people upon whom these categories are imposed. However, it introduces a legitimate cause to be used in official representation of social reality, framing of political claims, and organization of political actions.

⁴ Brubaker, Cooper, 2000, p.7.

⁵ *ibid*, p.8.

⁶ Brubaker, 2002, p.167.

⁷ Tilly, 1998, as quoted in Brubaker, 2002, p.169.

⁸ Armstrong, 1982, as quoted in Brubaker, 2002, p.169.

⁹ Horowitz, 1991, as quoted in Brubaker, 2002, p.174.

Making the research on identity, it is crucial to understand that it “exists only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, categorizations and identifications. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world. These include ethnicized ways of seeing (and ignoring), of construing (and misconstruing), of inferring (and misinferring), of remembering (and forgetting).”¹⁰

In order to separate the practical aspects of identity and treat it as a category of analysis, Brubaker suggests finding a substitute, which will exclude the whole lot of meanings accumulated around identity. As one of the possible substitutes he introduces the term “identification”.¹¹ This term will drop all the other connotations inherent to identity and will mean the process in which a person or a group of people are on their way to characterize themselves, to find the difference from other groups, and to define the role in a narrative. However, in this context there still must be a distinction between self-identification and external identification. As the former aspect relates more to the field of sociology and psychology, it is the latter form of identification that is of particular interest for this research, as it includes formalized, codified, objectified systems of categorization developed by powerful, authoritative institutions, which cannot be found in self-identification.

The state acts as one of the most influential agents of external identification. According to Bourdieu, “the state monopolizes, or seeks to monopolize, not only legitimate physical force but also legitimate symbolic force.”¹² Although these ideas were expressed by many post-modernism researchers, the contemporary identity-based conflicts make them evident. Using the conflict itself as a framework, the states use their authority to impose the categories and identities, framing them in official structures and legal acts, and making them unavoidable part of media, bureaucracy and society. However, it is crucial to note at this point that “even the most powerful state does not monopolize the production and diffusion of identifications and categories; and those that it does produce may be contested.”¹³

Speaking of identity, it is important to keep in mind that in social practice the inevitable parts of identity, including language, dialect and accent, are the object of mental representations.

¹⁰ Brubaker, 2002, p.175.

¹¹ Brubaker, Cooper, 2000, p.1.

¹² Bourdieu, 1991, as quoted in Brubaker, Cooper, 2000, p.15.

¹³ Brubaker, Cooper, 2000, p.16.

They belong to the realm of perception and appreciation, of cognition and recognition, where different involved parties invest their interests and their presuppositions, and of objectified representations in things or acts. Here, in this realm, they apply various self-interested strategies of symbolic manipulation, which are mostly aimed at determining the representation that other people may form of these properties and their bearers.

Struggles over identity, and specifically over such attributes of identity as place of origin and language, are part of different struggles over classifications, and basically over “the monopoly of the power to make people see and believe, to get them to know and recognize, to impose the legitimate definition of the divisions of the social world and, thereby, to make and unmake groups.”¹⁴ Possessing such power to impose vision of the social world through principles of division establishes “meaning and a consensus about meaning”, and, thus, it creates “the reality of the unity and the identity of the group.”¹⁵

We experience ourselves as if these things had a concrete existence in the world, but they are all brought into being through language.¹⁶ There is “nothing outside the text” and facts, truth, and reality are always only reference to alternative versions of events constructed for particular purposes through language. Staying in line with social constructionism theorists, it is crucial to remember that the truth does not exist in reality. There are only numerous constructions of the world, thus, references to the truth and facts are only references to the notions based on personal interpretations generated by culturally and historically specific factors.¹⁷ The application of language in this sense is the field where material objects and social formations obtain meaning and where the competing versions of reality are constructed in the service of interest and power.

1.1.2. Identity-based conflicts

In all modern wars and particularly in identity-based conflicts the struggle over vocal representation of the events and participants is as significant as direct military actions. Although the most visible and vivid forms of so-called “information war” are expressed

¹⁴ Bourdieu, 1991, p.223.

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.223.

¹⁶ Burr, 2006, as quoted in Ramsbotham, 2010, p.27.

¹⁷ *ibid*, p.28.

through active propaganda and media control, the hidden parts of it, or what Ramsbotham called “radical disagreements”, are in the deep underground basis of such conflicts.¹⁸ Indeed, clashes of perspective and conflicts of belief probably play the most important part and must be researched carefully.

The actions over interpretations of events and information has become a natural part of modern warfare. The victory and defeat is not defined anymore by territories and resources gained as result of the military success, but by success to convince everybody in the constructed “truth”. Thus, the violence must be stopped in the realm of words and definitions. John Vasquez notes that “because war was invented, it can be disinvented by people.”¹⁹

The competition of mutually exclusive goods does not play a significant role in generating and nourishing violence in identity-based conflicts. The (re)production of identities is often expressed through myths and memories constructing the images of enemy and threat is a decisive driver of violence.

During the conflict the group identity is constructed through repetition of narratives about negative events and actions setting the “enemy” identity in opposition. Such narratives become a new reality for the participants of the discourse. A joint identity of “victims of war” builds the boundary between “us” and “them”, making conflict resolution hardly possible and opening the space for future violence. Thus, even in case if the efforts to stop military actions and direct violence were successful, the possibility to reproduce antagonistic relations due to unsolved identity issues constructed within the conflict discourse puts these issues to the highest priority in conflict resolution.²⁰

Even if the violence in general has come to an end due to effective actions from international community, decisive initiatives from antagonistic parties, or just because a conflict shifts to a frozen confrontation stage, the careful treatment of identity issues is required in order to prevent a new outbreak. Chris Coker argues “that wars ... only really end when they are

¹⁸ Ramsbotham, 2010, p.8.

¹⁹ Vasquez, 1994, as quoted in Buckley-Zistel, 2006, p.30.

²⁰ Buckley-Zistel, 2006, p.10.

transcended, when they ... [go] beyond the traditional currency of victory and defeat; when the defeated side ... [accepts] that the victory of its enemy ... [is] also its victory as well.”²¹

Reduction of violence does not mean the end of a violent conflict. Post-conflict societies inevitably face new challenges arising from unsolved identity issues. After violent actions stop, “the experience of hardship and pain is deeply inscribed in the memory of individuals and groups and perpetuated through the stories people narrate about the event, keeping the dichotomies us/them or friend/enemy alive and obstructing paths to a peaceful future.”²²

The real results of conflict resolution are determined by the way how (former) enemies relate to each other and how they refer to the shared violent experience in a long-term perspective. “It is here where the parties to the conflict produce and reproduce their collective identities in either persistent antagonism or mutual acceptance.”²³

1.2. Identity in Ukraine

1.2.1. Two Identities

On the territories of former Soviet republics, including Ukraine, the notions of identity and nation were institutionalized and legally predetermined by the place of birth. However, the official nationality did not reflect the real situation on the ground. The very distinction between “Russians” and “Ukrainians” was vague and, in certain cases, illusive. Taking into account the high rates of intermarriage and the fact that a significant part of Ukrainian population uses only or primarily the Russian language in everyday life, the officially assigned identity cannot be accepted as given.

During the Soviet times the communist regime granted Ukrainian people with wider national identification, including promotion of Ukrainian as the state language. However, at the same time the Soviet government policy was aimed at construction of a common national identity in all regions. The promotion of Soviet ideology was not limited with language practices, but also included control over material culture, for example over dwellings. The consecutive urbanization and industrialization reforms conducted by the Soviet government has resulted

²¹ Buckley-Zistel, 2006, p.115.

²² Ibid, p.85.

²³ Ibid, pp.115-116.

in construction of a socialist image of accommodation and uniform daily routines present all across the Union, thus contributing to dissolution of differences among major nations and regions.²⁴ Therefore, the increase of application of Russian in communication, as well as strengthening of centralized governance, contributed to vanishing of the link between language, region and identity.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union all ethnic groups in Ukraine were granted equal political and social rights. Although the new official symbols and values were established based on those shared by the titular nation, the newly created Ukrainian nationhood included all citizens regardless of their origin and language preferences. The ongoing polemic about the status of the Ukrainian language lasted for the first two decades of the Ukrainian independence. All the governments throughout this period maintained a compromise position, giving Ukrainian the exclusive status of the titular language, while Russian prevailed in communicative practice. "However, Ukraine was not perceived as a nation with two languages. While Russian was respected as the language of a large part of the population and recognized as an accustomed communicative means within the country and beyond, Ukrainian was valued not only for its communicative functions but also for its symbolic role as the national language."²⁵

Independent Ukraine inherited an unfinished process of nation building complicated by historic, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences between regions. Regional loyalties continue to dominate over loyalty to a single national identity. The absence of a concept of nationhood and of a shared national idea accepted by the whole population has led to a controversial and often ambivalent process of national identity formation. This has left the Ukrainian people without clear internal and external social boundaries and a shared meaning of the nation.²⁶

Although it is deemed that the Ukrainian speaking part of the population are the major bearers of the national cultural legacy comparing to the Russian speakers in Ukraine, it is

²⁴ Seliverstova, 2017, p.67.

²⁵ Kulyk, 2016a, p.98.

²⁶ Korostelina, 2015, p.224.

crucial to note that both groups relate themselves to the country and equally participate in construction of identity in Ukraine.

Ukraine has often been described as split between two competing “identity complexes”.²⁷ The legacy of Ukrainian lands belonging to different polities, and pronounced regional divisions in the ethnic make-up, language use and religious affiliation created fertile ground for identity contestation. In the late 2000s, self-reported ethnic Ukrainians constituted 77.8% of Ukraine’s population, while ethnic Russians accounted for 17.3%. The use of Russian, however, extended far beyond the Russian minority. According to a 2008 survey, 35% of respondents spoke Russian at home compared to 43% who spoke Ukrainian. Moreover, further 20% admitted that they used both languages.²⁸ With most ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living in the southeast, identity contestation had a significant regional dimension. Shulman, for example, differentiates between an ‘Eastern Slavic identity complex’, based on identification with Russia, and an ‘ethnic Ukrainian identity complex’, based on distancing from Russia and identification with Europe.²⁹

It is interesting that the differences in identity are also reflected in the identity studies in Ukraine. For example, Ukrainian political and ethnic researcher from the Western part of Ukraine Mykola Riabchuk reflects in his studies the dominant discourse in contemporary Ukraine based on the traditional ideas of the Western nationalists. He argues that the border between two Ukrainian identities can be found not in the realm of territory, language, culture or ethnicity, but in the realm of political preferences. He sees the residents of most part of Ukraine with the core in the Western regions as the nation with experience of living in relatively liberal society with demand for respect of human rights, good governance and development, while the Eastern regions are seen as a traditional society with obsolete practices, which have been widely used when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, and which have not significantly changed, but evolved in some obscure mechanisms and supported by Russia. Thus, the differences in ethnicity, language or in the ways the past is remembered and represented are considered less important than the shared system of values contributing to

²⁷ Shulman, 2004, p.36.

²⁸ Feklyunina, 2015, p.15.

²⁹ Shulman, 2004., p.36.

the vision of future development. Hence, the conflict between Ukraine and Russia is taking place in the realm of axiology.³⁰

All other factors, such as ethnicity, language, region, income, education, or age, correlate to a different degree with one of them. During the elections, statistical data implicates that neither ethnicity nor language of the hypothetical candidate noticeably influence voting patterns, it is the stated political priorities that influence the voters' choice very strongly. Although there are statistical data that the division between two identities has some geographical analogue, the regression analysis allegedly shows that the value-based and identity driven divide between the Soviet and Pro-European identities correlates much less with ethnicity and language of the respondents and much more with their education and age.³¹

Some pro-Western Ukrainian researchers argue that the Ukrainian language, culture, and identity have become closely bound with democracy and the West, whilst Russian language, culture, and identity have become closely bound with authoritarianism and the Soviet past, so struggle for or against Ukrainian identity means struggle for or against democracy. "It is a fault line, where on one side stands a host of emerging and assertive identities on the other side are found those clinging to a post-Soviet identity, one characterized by political passivity and a reliance on state paternalism. Those in Ukraine who opt for "Europe" simply want to put an end to ugly post-Soviet practices (such as rapacious crony capitalism, corruption, nepotism, selective application of justice, etc.) and foster the rule of law, secure property rights, and protection of human dignity - the values they associate, correctly, with Europe."³²

1.2.2. Recent developments

The events on Euromaidan in 2014 that led to the changes in power and the aggressive interference of Russia have destabilized the status quo in identity building processes in Ukraine. Both information war launched by Russia and the intensive reforms in major spheres related to identity initiated by the new Ukrainian government have contributed to significant shift in the identity issues in Ukraine. Thus, numerous attempts to construct the new

³⁰ Torbakov, 2014, as quoted in Riabchuk, 2015, p.149.

³¹ Riabchuk, 2015, p.149.

³² Ibid, p.150.

identities can be traced since 2014 in Ukraine. Both conflicting parties use various tools in order to promote newly invented aggressive narratives. Same historical events and personalities are presented in conflicting ways, leading to construction of inconsistency and antagonism between the two societies. Russia seeks to challenge the previously vague and flexible boundary between Russian and Ukrainian identities, undermining the basic right of the Ukrainian nation and state to existence, while the new official discourse of the Ukrainian government is aimed at alienating the Ukrainian identity from Russia in order to distinguish its uniqueness and independence.

Identity is constructed through different cultural and instrumental state initiatives, and is “the result of open-ended processes that give space to actors pursuing their specific political projects”. Although the monopoly of the state in identity construction is widely questioned, the role of the state authorities in this process is still extremely important. “By articulating a particular variant of an identity narrative, the state mobilizes some structures while at the same time potentially weakening others. It signals to elites and public in other states about the interests that guide its foreign policy.”³³

The events of 2014 and further nationalization course of the Ukrainian government has contributed to the growth of discrepancy between two Ukrainian identities. While one part of the population has shown the increase in “self-identification as Ukrainian, greater pride in being a citizen of the Ukrainian state, stronger attachment to symbols of nationhood, enhanced solidarity with compatriots, increased readiness to defend Ukraine or work for Ukraine, and increased confidence in the people’s power to change the country for the better”³⁴, the other part has suffered greater alienation from the mainstream discourse. The increase of enmity towards Russia in general, and towards people allegedly supporting the “aggressor state” undermined their adherence to the Ukrainian state and their security.

For example, while most Ukrainian nationalists supported promotion of such national symbols as Ukrainian flag, its coat of arms and traditional clothing, the interpretation of these symbols significantly differed for the Russian speakers. The presence of different shapes and sizes of the Ukrainian national flag in car interiors, as a ribbon or a pin attached to someone’s

³³ Feklyunina, 2015, p.8.

³⁴ Kulyk, 2016b, p.93.

bag or coat, or a big flag hung on the balcony was not only an expression of empathy and patriotic feelings, but also a marker of political preferences and engagement in the political life of Ukraine. Thus, not having any visible national Ukrainian symbols could be seen as suspicious and interpreted as indifference, or in the worst case, as affiliation with anti-Ukrainian movement. For Russian speakers in the Western part of Ukraine, wearing Ukrainian national symbols was primarily for security reasons, not because of their ideological preferences. Although they were not indifferent to the events happening in Ukraine at the time, their reasons to expose national symbols were motivated with the desire not to be perceived negatively in the city.³⁵

Another example could be the changes in attitudes towards traditional clothing in Ukraine. The annual celebration of “Vyshyvanka day” was launched by Ukrainian student Lesya Voronyuk in 2007 and later has resulted in the official nationwide festivity proposed and adopted by the Ukrainian government in 2014. The official promotion of the vyshyvanka contributed to its becoming a mainstream attribute of Ukrainian patriots. However, many Russian speakers who supported it as part of Ukrainian culture before 2014, changed their attitude to the symbol. They claim that vyshyvanka has lost its patriotic meaning and has become a popular trend used for the purpose of avoidance to be an outsider in society.³⁶

Another example can be noticed in attitude towards products of Russian origin. After the initiative of Lviv activists to limit the consumption of Russian food products in March 2014, just in six month the Ukrainian government adopted the law to mark all the products made in Russia with visible signs of Russian flag. According to the Internet research done by TNS16 in September 2014, 46% of Ukrainians were boycotting Russian products “expressing patriotism and feelings toward their country.”³⁷ As a result, the import of Russian products was restricted on the national legislation level. However, many Russian speakers including those living in the Western Ukraine expressed their negative attitude to such initiatives and refused to participate in the boycott.

³⁵ Seliverstova, 2017, p.71.

³⁶ Ibid, p.72.

³⁷ Ibid, p.71.

Although the language card has been often played by Ukrainian politicians throughout the whole period of independence, after President Yanukovych was ousted from power the newly established government secured both the article of the Constitution which mandates Ukrainian as the sole state language and the 2012 language law recognizing the regional status of Russian. Thus, the “language matters lost the prominent place that they had occupied in their legislative initiatives and public statements.”³⁸

Apart from being the preferable language for business, Russian is considered more profitable by most media producers in Ukraine. “Not only could products in that language be bought and sold on both the Ukrainian and Russian markets, but also within Ukraine they had the advantage of being preferred by the more affluent urban audiences and, therefore, by advertisers catering primarily to these audiences.”³⁹

However, as response to Russian annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas, the Ukrainian government suspended and later banned broadcasting of several Russian television channels as the sources of information “flagrantly distorting the situation in Ukraine” in favor of the “aggressor country”. Moreover, the ban also expanded to the broadcast of Russian or Russian-oriented products on Ukrainian channels. The list included media products that “glorified present or past deeds of the Russian military”, as well as the products featuring actors or singers “who supported Russia’s policy with regard to the Crimea and Donbas, either in public statements or by performing in the occupied territories.”⁴⁰

In 2015 the Ministry of Culture initiated the law introducing 50% quota of national content, of which three-quarters was to be in Ukrainian. Even though many representatives of media in Ukraine have argued that such interference contradicted the democratic principles, which the government was always allegedly supported, and that there is a lack of high-quality media content in Ukrainian, the law came into power in 2016.⁴¹

³⁸ Kulyk, 2016a, p.99.

³⁹ Ibid, p.99.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.100.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.100.

However, despite the increase in symbolic significance of the Ukrainian language, it was not followed with the growth of its communicative role. Most Russian speakers did not correlate their belonging to the Ukrainian nation with their language.

The transformation of education system has played a significant role in development and transformation of national identity. It is argued that the language of instruction usually reflects the cultural and political preferences of the teacher and is often used in transmitting the official historical and national narratives in contemporary Ukraine. The changes in political discourse shows its close correlation with transformation of educational system. For instance, during the period of Yanukovich presidency in 2010-2014 the Ministry of Education attempted to secure the increase of courses taught in Russian at schools. On the contrary, the newly established government after the Euromaidan contributed to complete Ukrainization of educational system in the country.⁴²

Such reforms were primarily aimed at constructing the idea that the Ukrainian language is threatened by the Russian influence. At the state level, it is argued that the titular language is the prerequisite for Ukrainian independence and sovereignty, while promotion of Russian is presented as the core threat to the development of the Ukrainian nation. In practice, this new direction was followed by the series of laws developed by the Ukrainian parliament, which were aimed at “protecting the public status of the Ukrainian language, societal integration and strengthening the state and territorial unity of Ukraine.”⁴³ Moreover, it was proposed to establish system of punishment for those whose command of Ukrainian is not sufficient.

In general, the Ukrainian language is understood as the core of national identity and is put into opposition to the influence of Russia. Thus, the official political discourse in Ukraine “tends to depict Russian as a “backward”, “imperial remnant” of the Soviet Union”, while Ukrainian is considered to be “not only a key marker of national identity and a means of political independence, but also a chance for better “European prospects” and the clear sign

⁴² Maksimovtsova, 2017, pp.4-5.

⁴³ Ibid, p.15.

of Ukrainian Europeanness.”⁴⁴ Thus, protection of the Ukrainian language as the only state language is constructed as an inevitable part of the nation-building process.

However, the attitudes towards the official discourses were not the same in different regions even before the latest changes of power. The easiest way to trace these attitudes is through analyzing how history is taught in schools. It is clear that schoolteachers play a significant role in constructing national identity through formation of opinion among their students. Even if specific historical events or figures are studied from different perspectives, the opinion of the teacher will have a predominant role and will critically influence the opinions of students. According to the research conducted by Karina Korostelina in 2013, which included interviews with 60 teachers from three distinct regions in Ukraine (Crimea, Lviv and Kiev), the official history textbooks play a secondary role in the history classes. All the teachers admitted they altered the information given in the textbooks by criticizing it, emphasizing its limitations, and even pointing out errors. Although all three groups criticized the textbooks for inadequate presentation of the nation and deficiencies in the approach to the formation of their personal concept of national identity, such alterations significantly varied in different regions.⁴⁵

The predominant opinion in the Western regions stated that “ethnic Ukrainians have more rights than any other group to define the meaning of national identity.”⁴⁶ The Ukrainians living in the West are considered to be “more educated and culturally developed than Russians”⁴⁷, and to have a higher moral quality and values comparing to the people in the East. The teachers argued that the foundation of Ukrainian national identity must be based on the culture and language of the Western Ukrainians. Ethnic minorities can be excluded from the nation-building process as unimportant. Thus, the teachers from these regions encourage to put a strong emphasis on Ukrainian ethnic culture as a foundation for the nation, and to present the history of Ukraine as a consistent fight for independence.

Concerning the attitude towards Russia, these teachers juxtapose “victimized and peaceful Ukraine” and “aggressive Russia positing a constant threat to Ukraine.”⁴⁸ As part of the

⁴⁴ Maksimovtsova, 2017, p.22.

⁴⁵ Korostelina, 2015, p.226.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.227.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.227.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.230.

teaching process, they lift the facts depicting Russia as aggressive and imperialist, emphasizing the differences in culture, political orientation, and values between the two states. Regardless of admitting the plurality of opinions in different regions, these teachers argue that these differences can be excluded from the creation of the Ukrainian identity.

The Western Ukrainians tend to justify the violence, which took place during the UPA struggle for independence, through equating Nazism with communism and the presenting Ukraine as a victim suffered from both regimes. They also tend to glorify the Ukrainian nationalists of that period justifying their atrocities as a reaction to victimization. The Soviet Army is described as an army of occupants, who fought for protection of the regime at the cost of the independence of Ukraine.

The teachers from Crimea appealed to develop Ukrainian national identity on the principles of a multicultural state. They stressed that the promotion of the Ukrainian language and culture produces resistance among the local residents. They failed to see their region as part of the Ukrainian culture and history presented in the textbooks, and found it uninteresting to study both for themselves and for children. This group of teachers endorse a multicultural concept of national identity by condemning ethnic nationalism and a homogenous concept of national identity, and by emphasizing the multicultural nature of Ukraine and equal rights for all ethnic groups. In their teaching, they emphasize the narrowness and inadequacy of an ethnic national narrative and its exclusive and alien nature for many students and they promoted a vision of Ukraine as being comprised of different ethnic groups that contribute to the prosperity of the nation.⁴⁹

The teachers supported the negative attitude towards the actions of Mikhail Gorbachev that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which is depicted in the history textbooks. They also expressed satisfaction with the fact that the importance of the Orange Revolution is removed from official educational program and pro-Ukrainian ideology is significantly reduced. However, they stress out that the role of the Russian ethnic group is not represented in Ukrainian history, while Russia is treated as an alien country. Thus, they confirm that they teach the history of Russia not as a history of a foreign state, but in a wider perspective that

⁴⁹ Korostelina, 2015, pp.228-229.

includes many events affecting Ukraine. Thus, they attempt to “dissolve the boundary between the two states by teaching the common history, showing similarities between two nations and condemning Ukrainian ethnic nationalism.”⁵⁰

The teachers from Crimea also emphasized the contribution of the Soviet Union into unification and development of the Ukrainian state. While accepting the presence of both positive and negative aspects, they consider the Soviet time to be an inevitable part of the Ukrainian history. Thus, they teach the positive impacts of the Soviet regime for Ukraine, while laying responsibility for the current instability and economic crisis upon the Western nationalists. Moreover, they accuse the residents of the West of denying the achievements of Soviet Ukraine and of distorting the events of the World War II and undermining the role of the Soviet veterans in the war. The general negative perception of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) emphasized throughout the study process includes the facts of their collaboration with the Nazis and crimes committed on the occupied territory of Ukraine.⁵¹

The teachers from Kiev expressed the idea that the definition of a nation must be built on citizenship rather than ethnic culture. The state should be independent from ethnic identity. Thus, they promote the equality of all people of Ukraine omitting their ethnic or religious belonging. They claim that Ukraine should be a modern democratic state built around a political rather than an ethnic idea. They criticize ethnic nationalism and endorse democratic values. While presenting the events of the Soviet times, the teachers from Kiev choose to criticize both Ukrainian nationalism and Soviet totalitarianism without glorification of any particular side. In general, they try to emphasize mutual responsibilities of both sides for committed offenses by stressing how aggressive actions of each side derived from histories of intergroup relations, reciprocal wrongdoings, and misinterpretations.⁵²

It seems that this division of identities has contributed to the territorial divisions secured by the Russian annexation of Crimea and provocation of the civil war in Donbass. After 2014, Ukraine was able to incorporate the Western identity in its official discourse, while Crimea and Donbass found their support in Russia.

⁵⁰ Korostelina, 2015, p.231.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.234.

⁵² Ibid, p.237.

1.2.3. Russian information war

In 1999, Igor Sergeev, then Russia's minister of defense, admitted that Russia could not compete militarily with the West. Instead, he suggested searching for "revolutionary paths" and "asymmetrical directions". Thus, the Russian military and intelligence theorists set the course to elaborate new ideas for non-physical warfare, claiming that Russia was already under attack by western NGOs and media.⁵³

Although the notion of information war came into Russia's official discourse fairly recently, the early 2000s had already been marked by an outburst of image-building activities. Initially the attention was focused primarily on Western countries, where Moscow tried to project a narrative of Russia's belonging to the greater European civilization and to emphasize its reliability as a business partner. The events in Ukraine in 2004 that later was called the Orange Revolution marked a crucial turning point. The transfer of authority to pro-Western President Yushchenko was seen in Moscow as a result of direct intervention of the US. In other words, there was an overwhelming sense in Kremlin that the developments triggered by the Ukrainian Maidan have challenged Russia's national interest in an unprecedented manner. Anticipating losing influence in the neighboring region, the Russian authorities started to develop new instruments of indirect interference. This change in the official discourse coincided with a rapid increase of a number and activity of various actors. "Some already existing actors, such as the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation or the radio station 'Voice of Russia' saw a substantial increase in their funding. A number of new organizations were created with either direct or indirect involvement of the Kremlin, including the Russian World Foundation, the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, and the English-language TV channel 'Russia Today' (later rebranded as RT), with an Arabic and a Spanish-language channels following suite."⁵⁴

This policy was revised in early 2010s in order to stop further erosion of Moscow's influence in the region. Such actors as the US, NATO and the EU were considered to interfere into Russia's "sphere of privileged interests". One of the newly proposed instruments became

⁵³ Pomerantsev, 2015, p.3.

⁵⁴ Feklyunina, 2015, p.11.

Eurasian Union. Its success was seen as crucial for Russia's global competitiveness. Besides economic advantages, it was seen as "a project for maintaining the identity of nations in the historical Eurasian space". However, unlike Belarus and Kazakhstan, Ukraine was hardly eager to join the Customs Union with Russia. Thus, the Russian authorities viewed Ukraine as a missing link in Russia's economic and military security.⁵⁵

In 2013, the head of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation Valery Gerasimov claimed that it was now possible to defeat enemies through a "combination of political, economic, information, technological, and ecological campaigns".⁵⁶ This was part of a new vision of war, which lay not in the realm of physical contact but in what Russian theorists described as the "psychosphere". These wars of the future would be fought not on the battlefield but in the minds of people.

This idea was later developed into the concept of "hybrid war", where instead of or along with direct military involvement other asymmetric measures must be undertaken including "political, diplomatic, informational, economic, military, and other efforts".⁵⁷ A significant role in this new warfare was assigned to "information war", which in Russian understanding was based on the principle of "reflexive control". According to Timothy L Thomas, an analyst at the US army's Foreign Military Studies Office and an expert in recent Russian military history and theory, reflexive control involves "conveying to an opponent specially prepared information to incline him voluntarily to make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action".⁵⁸ In other words, to know your adversary's behavior patterns so well you can provoke him into doing what you want. A manual issued for Russian military staff and students suggests that it is possible to question the primacy of objects in the real world and to "put information before objects", thus reinventing the reality and spinning it in a favorable or unfavorable direction.⁵⁹

The transformation of Russia's approach to weaponization of information can be traced in the transition of the Kremlin's official international news channel Russia Today or currently RT

⁵⁵ Feklyunina, 2015, p.12.

⁵⁶ Pomerantsev, 2015, p.3.

⁵⁷ Chekinov, Bogdanov, 2013, as quoted in Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014, p.29.

⁵⁸ Pomerantsev, 2015, p.5.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p.9.

from a tool to introduce Russian vision of different events and its strategic goals into a comprehensive propaganda machine. According to the head of RT Margarita Simonyan, “there is no such thing as objective reporting”⁶⁰. Thus, the RT’s mission is to push the objectivity of facts to its breaking point. At the time when many in the west have lost faith in the integrity and authority of mainstream media organizations, RT seems to be dedicated to the proposition that after the notion of objectivity has evaporated all stories are equally true. If a commitment to the impossibility of objective reporting means that any position, however bizarre, is no better or worse than any other is, the ultimate effect, which may be the intended one, is to suggest that all media organizations are equally untrustworthy. This concept is quickly stretched to mean that any opinion has the same weight as others.

Although the official reasoning of such activities was framed in the discourse of soft power, Moscow’s understanding of this discourse was fairly different from Nye’s conceptualization and more reminiscent of Soviet propaganda. According to Putin, soft power is “a set of instruments and methods used to achieve foreign policy goals without resorting to military means, but with the help of information and other instruments of influence.”⁶¹ The Russian authorities were particularly keen to utilize various projects promoting the Russian language, media, and the Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet countries. The efforts in these countries primarily targeted those “compatriots”, who were either born in the Soviet Union or had intensive cultural ties with Russia.

Although the notion of the “Russian world” has been widely discussed among Russian researcher long before it was brought into official discourse, its key characteristics were defined during its active promotion after 2007 and especially after 2014.

Besides ethnic affiliations, the official definition included the Russian language, the Orthodox Christianity and the Russian culture. The Russian World Foundation drew a more detailed picture, by including ‘millions of ethnic Russians, native Russian speakers, their families and descendants’, but also ‘the millions of people worldwide who have chosen the Russian language as their subject of study, those who have developed an appreciation for Russia and its rich cultural heritage’. Concerning territory, Russian world was not limited by any borders

⁶⁰ Pomerantsev, 2015, p.7.

⁶¹ Feklyunina, 2015, p.11.

and countries. However, in practice the main attention was paid to Russia, Ukraine and Belarus as the countries with “strong bond of brotherhood” establishing the core of the Russian world.⁶² Moreover, the application of the Russian world concept to Ukraine was inconsistent as some agents included all Ukrainians regardless of their ethnic, linguistic or religious background; while the other narrowed it with include only Russian speakers or ethnic Russians residing in Ukraine.

Another feature of the Russian world, which was widely discussed within the Russian political discourse, includes the interpretation of the common past. Initially it was claimed that now independent states of Russian and Ukraine were both descendants of Kievan Rus and thus their citizens shared “common traditions, a common mentality, a common history and a common culture.”⁶³ Although Putin repeatedly argued that Russia had “no desire or aspiration to revive the Soviet empire”⁶⁴ and thus was not aimed at challenging the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states, what was challenged is identity of those living in Ukraine. It was claimed that Russians and Ukrainians continued to be “one people” in terms of their shared past and shared culture, hence the current separation was regarded as abnormal. Although the Ukrainian language and the Ukrainian culture, were described as one of many equal parts of the Russian world, Russia was regarded as the heart of the community thus constructing hierarchical relationship between Russia and other countries of the Russian world.

The popular attitude towards the concept of the Russian world were unevenly distributed in different regions of Ukraine. According to the survey conducted by Kyiv-based Razumkov Centre in 2013, the overwhelming majority of respondents in Western Ukraine (78.3%) negatively interpreted promotion of the Russian world as an aggressive attempt to restore the Russian empire, while only 14.8% of respondents in the South and 28.6% in the East related it with empirical ambitions, while the majority viewed it positively: 59.5% of respondents in the East and 70.4% in the South believed that the “Russian world” was primarily aimed at development of “spiritual unity of the brotherly peoples”. However, there was a significant shift in opinions comparing to the data collected in 2010. Thus, the share of

⁶² Feklyunina, 2015, p.14.

⁶³ Ibid, p.14.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.14.

respondents across Ukraine who understood the Russian world as an attempt to “restore the Russian empire” increased from 30.4% in 2010 to 48.4% in 2013, while the share of those who saw it positively dropped from 56.8% in 2010 to 39.7% in 2013. The explanation of this shift can be found in deterioration of general attitude towards Russia caused by the series of crises in relationships between Moscow and the West, which were followed with increase of highly media coverage where Russia was depicted mostly negatively.⁶⁵

Inside Russia and in areas of Eastern Ukraine where Russian television is dominant, the Kremlin’s political technologists have managed to create a parallel reality where “fascists” have taken power in Kiev, ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine are in mortal danger and the CIA is waging a war against Moscow. The notion of Novorossiia can serve as an example of construction of a new reality. This term originated from tsarist Russia where it represented a different geographical space was introduced by the Russia’s authorities to the large wedge of South-Eastern Ukraine. Nobody who lives in that part of Ukraine has ever thought of themselves as living in Novorossiia and bearing allegiance to it. Now Novorossiia is constructed into existence: Russian media are showing maps of its “geography”, while its “history” is secured in official school textbooks.

The aim of this new propaganda is not to convince or persuade, but to keep the viewer hooked and distracted, passive and paranoid, rather than agitated to action. The aim seems less to establish alternative truths than to spread confusion about the status of the truth. In a similar vein, the aim of the professional pro-Putin online trolls who haunt website comment sections is to make any constructive conversation impossible. Once the rational dialogue has been undermined, the side that tells better stories and does so more aggressively will edge out someone trying methodically to “prove” a fact. In this shape-shifting context, which endures today, all political philosophy becomes political technology, and the point of ideas and language are not what they represent, but what function they fulfill. The point of any statement is its effect rather than any notion of truth.

This new information warfare is guided by a new vital dimension, namely the belief that whose story wins may be more important than whose army wins. Ivan Krastev and Stephen

⁶⁵ Feklyunina, 2015, p.20.

Holmes argued that many Russians are perfectly aware that the news is faked. Thus, the media power is entrenched not by trying to persuade people that it is telling the truth, but by making it clear that it can dictate the terms of the “truth” and thus enhancing its influence.⁶⁶

1.2.4. Results

According to Torbakov, what Euromaidan stands for is, primarily, a value-based vision of Ukraine as part of a wider Europe. It is adherence to a set of values born at the dawn of European modernity including rule of law, division between public and private spheres, human rights, freedom that could and should become a cornerstone of the overarching Ukrainian national identity.⁶⁷

What the current situation with two contested identities practically means for the country is that the identity split is undermining democratic transition of Ukraine, as well as its international position. The clash made not only possible, but also tempting, for local leaders to channel popular dissatisfaction with their poor social and economic performance at the ominous force from either “heavily demonized Galicia (inhabited by crazy nationalists and led by American pawns) or caricatured Donbas (inhabited by homo Sovieticus and controlled by local mafia and the Russian fifth column.”⁶⁸ What in some other Eastern European countries with Soviet experience could be merely a struggle between two mediocre politicians, in Ukraine appeared to be suicidal infighting between “two bad candidates that benefited the third, profoundly anti-European and antidemocratic force” with vast support from the East.⁶⁹

Ukrainian identity, its development and transformation have always been at the core of Russia-Ukraine relations. Cultural proximity and long period of shared history have always played a significant role in making Ukraine central to Russia’s geopolitical interests. Both during the coexistence under the same flag, and especially after the end of the Soviet era, the uneasy relationship of two “Slavic brothers” has been evolving in the realm of mutual misperceptions, conflicting historical myths and contested identities. Instead of supporting the Soviet idea of Ukraine being a part of Russia’s geopolitical greatness, contemporary

⁶⁶ Holmes, Krastev, 2012, as quoted in Pomerantsev, Weiss, 2014, p.10.

⁶⁷ Torbakov, 2014, p.203.

⁶⁸ Riabchuk, 2015, p.9.

⁶⁹ Riabchuk, 2012, p.445.

Ukrainian government has developed its own historical narrative based on the history of freedom and resistance. "This is the crux of the matter: whereas Russia's grand story emphasizes togetherness, the Ukrainian one stresses separateness. No wonder the two have clashed."⁷⁰

Before the political crisis in Ukraine, the inhabitants of the East have been sharing Russian official historical narrative. The East had no tradition of a Ukrainian nationalist movement, its population, unlike that of the West, has internalized Soviet identity and suppressed the collective trauma of the Holodomor. What especially divides the East and West, according to this discourse, is the respective collective memories of World War II and the irreconcilable narratives of heroism and suffering. Indeed, while western Ukraine honors the heroes of the UPA, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which fought for an independent Ukraine against both Hitler and Stalin, Eastern Ukraine shared with the Russia the heroic narrative of the Great Patriotic war. Arguably, until now most Russians and some segments of Ukraine's population (which includes 11 million ethnic Russians) have not seen the difference between the two Slavic peoples and, consequently, have not understood the *raison d'être* of a separate Ukrainian state.⁷¹

The Russian aggression catalyzed the creation of a political nation. Ukrainian identity, which for so long had been associated with ethnicity, language and historical memory, suddenly has become territorial, political, and thus inclusive. Even for the Russian-speaking urban middle class, along with small and medium-sized business owners and the intellectual elites in the East of Ukraine, Russia's antidemocratic tendencies, its self-isolation and growing hostility to the West made it easier to become a part of Ukrainian national identity, based on the European values. The Russian interference, paradoxically, not only polarized the Russophone group but also consolidated the major part of it with Ukrainophones around the common cause, against the common enemy.

The contested identity in the Eastern part of Ukraine, which is often being called "post-Soviet" is hardly related to the identity, which has been constructed in the Soviet Union. It is not the remnants of Soviet modernity that prevents the Europeanization of Ukraine but a monstrous

⁷⁰ Torbakov, 2014, p.197.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.187.

neoplasm that has grown upon its ruins. That is why the aggressive anti-Soviet rhetoric of many Euromaidan activists misses the target. What is currently confronting the Kyiv government has little to do with Soviet ideology and values; instead, it represents a phenomenon referred to by the Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov ten years ago as "negative identity" which operates primarily with the category of the "enemy". From the perspective of pro-Russian protesters, this is the "Banderites" and "nationalists" from Kyiv and western Ukraine, who want to destroy "our monuments" and steal "our past". The Lenin monuments thus have become a site and symbol of pro-Russian mobilization – "empty signifiers" that carry no ideological value but mark local identity as being "anti-Kyiv".⁷²

The loyalty of the Russian-speaking population to the Ukrainian state had never been tried before. Yet the ugly face of pro-Russian separatism, the everyday terror and the anomy it has brought to Donbas, have had a sobering effect on many potential Russophiles. In facing the separatist threat and Russian aggression, Dnipropetrovsk, Odessa, Kharkiv and other big and small cities have rediscovered their "Ukrainianness" and are manifesting it in various ways. The undeclared Russo-Ukrainian war has catalyzed the growth of Ukrainian civic rather than ethnic nationalism, which was quite a rational and reasonable response of a bi-ethnic and bilingual society to the external military threat. First, it framed new identity in a more clear and understandable form. The fact is that, with the annexation of Crimea and the military conflict in the East, the era of post-Soviet ambiguity and tolerance of blurred identities and multiple loyalties has ended.⁷³

The dramatic developments of spring 2014 have demonstrated that collective identities are situational and contextual and can rapidly change, especially under conditions of territorial secession, external aggression and military conflict. Moreover, Moscow aggression has clarified the main obstacles on the way of Ukrainian integration.

If according to the survey conducted in 2001, the prevailing definition of the Ukrainian community was based on the civic principles including "coexistence and equal rights in the framework of one state" as well as respect for the Ukrainian state's institutions and laws, the

⁷² Zhurzhenko, 2014, p.6.

⁷³ Ibid, p.3.

more recent surveys showed predominance of nationalistic and ethno-cultural aspects of identity.⁷⁴

According to the results of the research done by Volodymyr Kulyk in 2016, the differences in self-identification within the Ukrainian state were primarily based on the territorial factor and less on linguistic. The citizens of Ukraine residing in the Western and Central part of the country highlighted their belonging to the Ukrainian nation as predominant, while in the Eastern and Southern parts it was less salient, and in the Donbas region it trailed the regional and local self-identification.⁷⁵

The events of Euromaidan followed with Russian annexation of Crimea and ongoing war in Donbas are believed to have caused a growth of national identification in Ukraine. However, development of national identity did not lead to significant increase in the use of the Ukrainian language. According to numerous surveys, most part of Russian speakers in Ukraine argue to be Ukrainian patriots without abandoning their native language.

As far as the attitude toward Russia is concerned, it has deteriorated to a greater or lesser extent in all regions excluding the Donbas. However, in most cases the negative attitude toward the state did not extend to the Russian people. “When asked to express their opinion about the statement ‘Whatever the authorities do, the Russian people will always be close to the Ukrainian one’, 24% of respondents in the 2014 survey fully agreed and a further 40% ‘rather agreed’, while only 11% more or less firmly objected.”⁷⁶

Despite the efforts of the Ukrainian state to construct distinction and alienation of the new Ukrainian identity from Russian people, the general attitude at the grassroots level has not radically changed. The survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in September 2014 has shown that 59% of those who viewed themselves primarily as citizens of Ukraine resolutely or hesitantly expressed a friendly attitude towards the Russians. Answering the question “Whatever the authorities do, the Russian people will always be close to the Ukrainian one” some 24% of the respondents fully agreed with this view and a further 40% “rather agreed”, while only 11% firmly objected. These figures imply that proximity between

⁷⁴ Shulman, 2004, p.9.

⁷⁵ Kulyk, 2016a, p.592.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.601.

the Ukrainian and Russian peoples remains one of the least contested aspects of Ukrainian identity, even if Ukrainians disagree on the exact nature of this proximity.⁷⁷ However, 43% of the respondents placed the responsibility for the ongoing conflict on “Russian authorities which provide armed support to the separatists”, while 19% argued that “the participants in the Maidan protests who have overthrown the legitimate president of Ukraine” were the ones to be responsible for the bloodshed.⁷⁸

Moreover, there was a shift in perception of Ukrainian nationalism movement after 2014. For instance, the attitude toward Stepan Bandera, the leader of the Ukrainian nationalist resistance fighting against the Soviet regime during the World War II, has improved, although the majority preserved rather negative impression of him. Consequently, the attitude toward Joseph Stalin, who opposed and suppressed the resistance, deteriorated. Such tendency can be observed in all regions except for the Donbas, where perception of Bandera became more critical, while perception of Stalin less critical. Some participants explicitly criticized the actions of today’s nationalists as driven by fashion or even self-interest.⁷⁹

The regional differences were evident in regard to the direction of the foreign policy of Ukraine. When asked about their integration preferences in March - April 2012, nearly half of respondents in the South (47%) and the majority of respondents in the East (60%) chose Ukraine’s accession to the Customs Union with Russia. In comparison, only 7% of respondents in Western Ukraine supported this option while the overwhelming majority (70%) favored accession to the EU.⁸⁰ According to a similar survey conducted in 2015, the support of the foreign policy directions was equally distributed between the Western-Central part of Ukraine and the East-South. In the West 64% firmly or hesitantly supported the EU integration course, while in the East 55% of the respondents favored alliance with Russia.⁸¹

The very meaning of belonging to the Ukrainian nation has changed, a change most vividly manifested in the increased alienation from Russia and the greater embrace of Ukrainian nationalism as a worldview and, accordingly, as a historical narrative. At the same time, most

⁷⁷ Kulyk, 2016a, p.601.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.602.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.604.

⁸⁰ Feklyunina, 2015, p.20.

⁸¹ Kulyk, 2016a, p.603.

Ukrainians remain ambivalent about distancing themselves from the Russian people who they seek to distinguish from the state pursuing a hostile policy towards Ukraine. Similarly ambivalent is the popular perception of Ukrainian nationalism, which seems to be more acceptable as an historical phenomenon than a contemporary ideological current. Moreover, people in various parts of Ukraine are reluctant to give up their accustomed reliance on the Russian language, although they recognize the special role of the titular language as a national attribute.

2. Conflict Transformation and Dialogue

2.1. Conflict Transformation

2.1.1. Conflict transformation discourse

The traditional discourse of conflict resolution meets more and more criticism both on the part of the academia and of the people and organizations on the ground.

Conflict resolution primarily stands for the assumption that conflicts are short term processes with highly adverse effects, which are able to and must be resolved quickly with appropriate approach. It sees conflict as a negative state to be replaced by peace and settled with favorable agreement. However, the whole idea of conflict resolution often ignores the underlying structures and dynamics at play. Researchers in conflict resolution theory argue that there is no place for compromise in identity conflicts, so they suggest setting focus on reframing positions and interests through analysis and questioning. Thus, they emphasize the role of independent non-biased mediators who are able to invest in mutual understanding and building new relationships between the conflicting societies. Their role is to look into the root reasons of the conflict and find creative solutions benefitting to both parties. The ideas of the shift from a zero-sum situation to positive-sum constructive results is in the center of conflict resolution approach. The aim is to develop “processes of conflict resolution that appear to be acceptable to parties in dispute, and effective in resolving conflict.”⁸²

Alternatively, as a development from conflict resolution discourse, conflict resolution conflict management assumes that finding an appropriate resolution to a conflict is an unrealistic goal, thus it aims to at least control, contain, limit, and, if possible, exclude those negative attributes conflict generates. Conflict management stands for the assumption that conflicts are not completely eradicated even if the attempts of resolution were successful. It claims that emphasis to be placed on managing their destructive negative impacts and enhancing their advantageous positive components.⁸³

⁸² Azar, Burton, 1986, as quoted in Miall, 2004, p.4.

⁸³ Lederach, 1995.

Researchers in conflict management theory argue that violent conflicts are usually caused by the differences in values and interests, which can emerge both between opposing societies and within one complex community. Existing structural institutions, historical background, and unequal distribution of power are often the main core reasons generating violence. They argue that hardly any efforts are capable of resolving such conflicts, thus the focus must be set on managing and containing them, which in long-term perspective can possibly lead to “a historic compromise in which violence may be laid aside and normal politics resumed”.⁸⁴

Thus, conflict management can be characterized as the approach where appropriate intervention from those who have power and resources to assert influence over the conflicting parties are the only actors capable of achieving real political settlements. They can also contribute to designing and controlling legitimate institutions, through which it is possible to guide violence into tolerable direction. Bloomfield and Reilly define conflict management as “the positive and constructive handling of difference and divergence. Rather than advocating methods for removing conflict, [it] addresses the more realistic question of managing conflict: how to deal with it in a constructive way, how to bring opposing sides together in a cooperative process, how to design a practical, achievable, cooperative system for the constructive management of difference.”⁸⁵

Lederach argues that conflict resolution discourse fails to see conflicts as something natural, intrinsic to societal development and even in some cases benefitting for it. It frequently treats conflicts as entire negative phenomenon, and are “seeking to stop the conflict and create harmony at the expense of justice.”⁸⁶ Moreover, the framework presumes that conflicts are always unfavorable; hence they should be controlled and their whole setting should be contained. Such approach fails to “capture the broader sense of peacemaking, as it narrows its focus to the technical and practical side of the effort.”⁸⁷

The primary formula of conflict transformation lies in strong contrast to the ideas of conflict resolution discourse and is closely correlated with conflict management. At its core, conflict transformation seeks to restructure the ontological foundations of conflicts. It recognizes the

⁸⁴ Miall, 2004, p.3.

⁸⁵ Bloomfield, Reilly, 1998, as quoted in Miall, 2004, p.3.

⁸⁶ Lederach, 1995, p.16

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.17.

necessity of acknowledging the fact that the “very structure of parties and relationships may be embedded in a pattern of conflictual relationships that extend beyond the particular site of conflict.”⁸⁸ Therefore, it is a “process of engaging with and transforming the relationships, interests, discourses and...the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict.”⁸⁹

The primal idea of conflict transformation can be reflected through the words of Oliver Ramsbotham: “The normative aim of conflict resolution is not to overcome conflict. Conflict cannot be overcome – it is an unavoidable feature of social development. And conflict should not be overcome, in combating an unjust situation. The aim, rather, is to transform actually or potentially violent conflict into non-violent forms of social struggle and social change.”⁹⁰

Conflict transformation theory arose from the inability of existing peace-making approaches to actually solve modern conflicts by reframing positions or finding win-win outcomes. The researchers in this field argue that the causes of violence are not limited to a particular conflict, but come from the natural conflictual relationships framed in the structure of parties and determining the relationships between them. Conflict transformation aim is therefore “to transform the existing conflictual relationships, interests, discourses and, if necessary, the very constitution of society that supports the continuation of violent conflict.”⁹¹ Thus, in order to solve the conflict, it is necessary to set focus on the comprehensive long-term peacebuilding process and involve all possible parties, including “people within the conflict parties, within the society or region affected, and outsiders with relevant human and material resources.”⁹² Such process should be generated through a series of smaller or larger steps from a whole variety of actors, who may play an important role at different stages, contributing to a common goal. Lederach suggests that “conflict transformation must actively envision, include, respect, and promote the human and cultural resources from within a given setting. This involves a new set of lenses through which we do not primarily “see” the setting and the people in it as the “problem” and the outsider as the “answer”. Rather, we

⁸⁸ Miall, 2004, p.4.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.4.

⁹⁰ Ramsbotham, 2010, p.53.

⁹¹ Miall, 2004, p.4.

⁹² Ibid, p.4.

understand the long-term goal of transformation as validating and building on people and resources within the setting.”⁹³

Vayrynen argues that “the bulk of conflict theory regards the issues, actors and interests as given and on that basis, makes efforts to find a solution to mitigate or eliminate contradictions between them. Yet the issues, actors and interests change over time as a consequence of the social, economic and political dynamics of societies.”⁹⁴

The principal concepts of conflict transformation, which contrast with other theories and make it unique as approach, include delegating more responsibility and decision-making to the direct participants of a conflict, as well as broader potential for independent specification of key issues at stake or possible solutions. Rupesinghe suggests a comprehensive, eclectic approach to conflict transformation that embraces multitrack interventions. He proposes building peace constituencies at the grassroots level and across the parties at the civil society level (where it exists), and also creating peace alliances with any groups able to bring about change, such as business groups, the media and the military.⁹⁵ Rupesinghe and Anderlini argue that such approaches as conflict resolution and conflict management usually imply a specific set of activities undertaken by specific actors, whereas conflict transformation includes the above mentioned concepts complemented with involvement of other, often less significant and less visible actors able to contribute to peace efforts. It is a “fundamental conceptual shift in the way global security issues are addressed.”⁹⁶ The conflict transformation theory is more open to operating on the field of historical complexity and competing narratives that are inevitable part of modern conflicts. It is more flexible and dynamic than conflict resolution and conflict management frameworks, and allows to extend operational mandate.

Conflict transformation assumes conflict to be an important inherent part of social structure. It sees conflict as a dynamic process rather than a static condition that needs to be removed. Conflict is entangled in a complex network of small and large clashes resulted from the past experience and present development, with several actors of different degrees of involvement

⁹³ Lederach, 1995, as quoted in Miall, 2004, p.4.

⁹⁴ Vayrynen, 1991, as quoted in Miall, 2004, p.5.

⁹⁵ Rupesinghe 1995, 1998.

⁹⁶ Rupesinghe, Anderlini, 1998, as quoted in Miall, 2004, p.5.

and with indistinct concepts of enemies and allies. Modern conflicts are dynamic and it is seldom possible to predict the pattern they may develop into. Warring parties apply sophisticated strategies using violent and non-violent actions to explode the reputation of their opponents. Thus, instead of seeking to find a compromise among the parties to meet their differing interests, conflict transformation aims at changing the nature and functions of violence.⁹⁷ It seeks to transform those characteristics of systems, cultures and institutions that cause violence to escalate. Conflict transformation aims at altering relationships, discourses, attitudes and interests, the very structure behind the conflict. Instead of trying to elaborate direct measures to resolve conflict or manage the outcomes, it offers to build a long-term approach based on the capacities of the people and resources inside the conflict.⁹⁸

Parlevliet argues that human rights must be a significant part of the conflict transformation process. It should look beyond evident inequalities and attempt to transform the very “systems, structures and relationships which give rise to violence and injustice.”⁹⁹ Such approach is in line with Lederach’s conceptualisation of conflict transformation, since he also suggests that “the building of right relationships and social structures through a radical respect for human rights” is one of the possible ways to follow.¹⁰⁰ Both researchers agree that neither conflict resolution nor conflict management frameworks pay enough attention to social justice and human rights. On the contrary, conflict transformation is able to effectively address the “power imbalances and unjust relationships”, which are inevitable part of modern conflicts.¹⁰¹

Some researchers see differing perceptions of identity shown through constructed definitions of “us” and “them” as an integral part of modern armed conflicts. They argue that identity lays among the major factors contributing to intractability of conflict. Strong enemy images, negative stereotypes, scapegoating and dehumanization of opposing parties are common characteristic of these types of conflicts.¹⁰² Discourse, narratives, myths and tales contribute

⁹⁷ Väyrynen, 1991.

⁹⁸ Lederach, 1995.

⁹⁹ Parlevliet, 2009, p.3.

¹⁰⁰ Lederach, 2003, p.1.

¹⁰¹ Parlevliet, 2009, p.3.

¹⁰² Northrup, 1989.

to the way the past is remembered, identities conceptualized and boundaries drawn between groups.¹⁰³

Strömbom assumes that public debate and questioning of perceptions of self and others are able to significantly contribute to the transformation of identity-based conflicts. It is vital to explore the processes fostering formation of collective identities in order to transform the whole structures producing violence. Such efforts may help to redefine antagonistic relationships and lead to establishment of peaceful relations between warring parties.¹⁰⁴

2.1.2. Transforming identity¹⁰⁵

The prevailing peace mediation and facilitation approaches treat social-psychological perceptions as one of the core obstacles obstructing meaningful negotiations. Such obstacles must be removed before any attempts to build a dialogue; thus, the identity-related problems are excluded from peace-making process. In consequence, “antagonistic identities, collective memories and historical narratives are bypassed, not being seen as relevant themes of mediation.”¹⁰⁶

In order to achieve sustainable peace, close attention at the early stages of conflict resolution must be paid to the transformation of identities and collective memories. These issues cannot be ignored before the attempts to resolve conflict start, nor can they be left to the last phase of conflict transformation and post-conflict reconciliation.

Ramsbotham argues that radical disagreement is in the core of the conflict, excluding the possibility of rival discourses to coexist peacefully.¹⁰⁷ Buckley-Zistel sees antagonistic identities as part of a true nature of the conflict, noting that “conflict transformation refers to approaches that seek to encourage wider social change through transforming the antagonistic relationship between the parties to the conflict.”¹⁰⁸ Elaborating on the same

¹⁰³ Buckley-Zistel, 2006

¹⁰⁴ Strömbom, 2013

¹⁰⁵ This part until the end of Chapter 3 is inspired by and based on the research by Marko Lehti, including but not limited with Lehti, 2016.

¹⁰⁶ Lehti, 2016, p.8.

¹⁰⁷ Ramsbotham, 2010.

¹⁰⁸ Buckley-Zistel, 2006.

assumptions, Vivienne Jabri argues that “moving from war to peace is discursive process that requires transformation of identities.”¹⁰⁹

Addressing the same historical events including injustices from different perspectives defines the root causes of the conflict, leading to construction of entire groups such as victims and perpetrators.¹¹⁰ Narratives about the past used within the conflict discourse usually include emotional explanations of historical crimes, legitimacy to possess certain geographic areas, or the right of a particular ethnicity to exist. These narratives are being used as a foundation for identities to be constructed. In this sense, the conflict transformation is only possible if these antagonistic identities and narratives are recognized and included in the peace process. The possibility for antagonistic societies to express and hear alternative narratives without fueling violence is a prerequisite for sustainable peace.

If collective memories and constructed narratives of the past are inherent part of the society in conflict, they often lead to establishment of “legal frames for how ‘our story’ can be remembered.” The alternative “enemy” narratives thus are explained as misunderstanding and misinterpreting the past, and basically endanger the whole existence of society.¹¹¹ However, Aggestam notes that the recognition of alternative historical narratives through apology, symbolic gestures and concessions can lead to a just and durable peace. Dialogue provides opportunity to redefine memories and identities, resulting in transformation and fusion of the narratives of the past.¹¹²

However, conflict as “ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual” can be seen as an integral part of the democratic society.¹¹³ Moreover, Mouffe argues that antagonism is natural and the close attention must be paid to the transformation of the image of potentially dangerous enemy into an adversary “whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question.”¹¹⁴ Thus, the

¹⁰⁹ Jabri, 1996, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.11.

¹¹⁰ Buckley-Zistel, 2006, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.11.

¹¹¹ Mäliksoo, 2015, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.12.

¹¹² Aggestam, 2013, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.12.

¹¹³ Mouffe, 1999, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.13.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

conflict transformation has to be aimed at transforming societal antagonism into agonism, or from violence to peaceful confrontation.

If the past is usually reflected through the present, while the vision of the future depends on the interpretation of both past and present, the matter of such interpretation must be the core question of the conflict transformation. Successful revision of the past opens the opportunities to build a new collective identity. Such identity should be based not on antagonism, but on peaceful coexistence and mutual respect.

Thus, the foundation for the conflict transformation should be found in rethinking the narratives about the past and fusion of horizons of the former enemies. The path from antagonism to agonism lies in acceptance of alternative narratives and can lead to reconciliation, where “a majority of a society’s members change their beliefs about the former adversary, about their own society, and about the relationship between the two groups.”¹¹⁵

Aggestam suggests the “recognitional just peace”, where parties “acknowledge the other side’s historical grievances” as “a first step towards recognizing the fact that there are several narratives of the conflict.” Understanding the difference and accepting the diversity of narratives can contribute to revision of realities and possibly result in implementation of the politics of recognition, where the past determines the future.¹¹⁶

Researchers in conflict transformation theory seem to agree that the simultaneous engagement from all concerned actors starting from highest political levels to individual grassroots initiatives is the most benefitting to successful transformation.¹¹⁷ Certain researchers suggest dialogue to be among the possible drivers to reconceptualize identity and construct a new form of relations in conflict. The official discourses of warring parties claiming to reflect a particular reality tend to exclude alternative perspectives and interpretations. Conflict transformation through deconstruction is aimed at revealing these limits and encouraging plural, alternative interpretations. Since belligerent attitudes and perceptions are generated in discourse and language, it is possible to alter the discursive settings through

¹¹⁵ Rumelili, 2015, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.16.

¹¹⁶ Aggestam, 2013, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.16.

¹¹⁷ Kriesberg, 2011.

communication and dialogue. Dialogue can be successfully used in attempts to reestablish trust and understanding, to redefine identity concepts and to improve relationships between antagonistic groups. Feller and Ryan argue dialogue must be put to a high priority in peace processes and should also be recognized as such by high-level, official actors.¹¹⁸

2.2. Dialogue in Conflict Transformation

Feller and Ryan introduce dialogue as “movement aimed at generating coexistence <...> through encountering the “other” to share experiences, to think together in creative and flexible ways, and to explore assumptions together. Dialogue is holistic, requiring ongoing efforts to engage a broad base of society across generations.” They argue that such approach to dialogue is crucial component of successful post-conflict transformation leading to stability within the society.¹¹⁹

According to Ramsbotham, the most successful research on radical disagreements can be made by analyzing conversation between people with opposing visions of reality. By listening to what they have to say, how they continually address background context and interpret facts and personalities based on their beliefs framed by political environment, it is possible to “plunge into the disagreement itself”¹²⁰.

Bohm argues that the special relationship between thinking and speaking is the central part of successful dialogue. General discussion on seemingly same matters leads to a deeper understanding between opponents. “For example, consider a dialogue . . . when one person says something, the other person does not in general respond with exactly the same meaning as that seen by the first person. Rather, the meanings are only similar and not identical. Thus, when the second person replies, the first person sees a difference between what he meant to say and what the other person understood. On considering this difference, he may then be able to see something new.”¹²¹ Thus, dialogue is able to provide room for breaking the boundaries of misunderstanding and misinterpretation between antagonistic societies, which contributes to conflict transformation.

¹¹⁸ Feller, Ryan, 2012, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, pp.17-18.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.18.

¹²⁰ Ramsbotham, 2010, p.22.

¹²¹ Bohm, 1996, p.2.

Within the framework of conflict transformation dialogue is mainly aimed at deconstruction of enemy images and narrative and construction of shared meanings and narratives. Dialogue is the necessary link from antagonism to agonism. Feller and Ryan approach dialogue as “movement aimed at generating coexistence and does so through encountering the “other” to share experiences, to think together in creative and flexible ways, and to explore assumptions together”.¹²² Using dialogue in peace-making process is unique inherent part of conflict transformation and reconciliation, which abstract it from other conflict resolution practices.

When dialogue is understood as an act of sharing, it contributes to changing the vision of the other as the enemy, building enduring structures, where different societies are able to coexist peacefully.¹²³ Richard Sennett notes that dialogue and seeking for a common ground may not necessarily end up with a shared agreement, but through “the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another.”¹²⁴

However, it is crucial that dialogue as part of conflict transformation process is not focused on studying identity itself, but it should look at identification. Researching the processes of perception and categorization should be the core element of peaceful dialogue. The shift from identities to identification, from narratives to their construction and execution, from those who carry identity to those who cultivate it must be in the center of conflict transformation.

Constructive dialogue can be the necessary ground for conflict parties to “discuss their differences with the objective of clarifying them and attempting to find a solution that integrates the best thoughts that emerge during the discussion, no matter who articulates them.” Simple discussion and exchange of views can result in deeper understanding of antagonist picture of the world and enriching views of the matter that is initially in controversy. Floyer Acland argues “it is the tangle of material interests, emotions, prejudices, vanities, past experiences, personal insecurities and immediate feelings that drive disputes and make them so hard to resolve: these are the *real* issues. People are not motivated by

¹²² Feller, Ryan, 2012, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, pp.17-18.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Sennett, 2012, as quoted in Lehti, 2016, p.18.

facts: they are motivated by their *perceptions* of the facts, their *interpretations* of the facts, their *feelings* about the facts.”¹²⁵

The aim of dialogue is not to find who is right and who is wrong or whose interpretation of the truth has more right to exist, but to overcome “misunderstanding, a failure of communication, a clash of values, a collision of equally valid interests.”¹²⁶ The aim is to discover that interpretations, goals and directions might be different, but equally essential and valuable.

Moreover, dialogue can be successfully held between ordinary members of the antagonistic groups and result in “increased understanding and trust among the participants with some eventual positive effects on public opinion.”¹²⁷ “The aim is to improve communication, sensitivity, critical self-awareness and mutual understanding between individuals and groups, the lack of which is seen to be a key ingredient in generating the social milieu in which violent conflict breeds.”¹²⁸ Through dialogue it is possible to enable open communication, honest speaking, and genuine listening. It serves as a universal platform for people to express their assumptions, to question their previous judgments and worldviews, and to change the way they think.

The truly constructive dialogue is only possible if participants are willing to open themselves to new meanings, to engage in genuine dialogue, and to constantly respond to the new demands emanating from the situation. The point of the dialogue is to deepen mutual understanding, to expand sympathy and imagination, to exchange not only arguments but also sensibilities, to take a critical look at oneself, to build up mutual trust, and to arrive at a more just and balanced view of both the contentious issues and the world in general.¹²⁹

Ramsbotham underlines that significant attention in discourse and dialogue must be paid to terminology and language used to manifest “radical disagreements” in conflict. He implies that understanding the agonistic dialogue among adversaries is crucial in terms of conflict

¹²⁵ Acland, 1995, as quoted in Ramsbotham, 2010, p.58.

¹²⁶ Ibid, pp.58-59.

¹²⁷ Fisher, 1997, as quoted in Ramsbotham, 2010, p.72.

¹²⁸ Ramsbotham, 2010, p.87.

¹²⁹ Parekh, 2002, as quoted in Ramsbotham, 2010, pp.75-76.

transformation.¹³⁰ However, the strategies must be tailor-made for different contexts. He brings up a grassroots dialogue as an example, which can build “the whole foundation for future transformation” but, at the same time, may fail to yield positive results if there is a formidable opposition on political level.¹³¹ Overall, grassroots dialogue as means in conflict transformation attempts has been largely acknowledged as useful in recent studies. Maddison argues that a significant part of processes contributing to transformation of conflicts takes place in low profile inter-communal dialogue rather than in frames of high-level initiatives.¹³² Northrup sees grassroots dialogue as a safer space for deconstructing negative images of the perceived enemy.¹³³

Approaches to initiate dialogue may vary in different contexts, but the basic idea is to provide a sustainable ground to exchange views on sensitive issues and to build mutual understanding undermined by conflict. Francis suggests workshops to be efficient in sharing knowledge and increasing the capacity of individuals for constructive action.¹³⁴ Ryan claims that any projects contributing to cooperation and communication between antagonistic societies, such as construction and agriculture projects or even cooperation within sports and music, are capable to start positive relations and contribute to conflict transformation.¹³⁵

In general, some researchers, including Kriesberg argue that conflict transformation is not an alternative research juxtaposing to seemingly inefficient conflict resolution and conflict management studies, but a complex of ideas and suggestions suitable to be incorporated as a complement into any conflict resolution, mediation or peacebuilding process.¹³⁶ Both Miall¹³⁷ and Kriesberg¹³⁸ agree that conflict transformation still needs further research. Especially it is relevant in terms of its possible impacts on conflicts, as the actual implementation of the theory is rare to observe yet.

¹³⁰ Ramsbotham, 2010.

¹³¹ Ibid, p.247.

¹³² Maddison, 2015.

¹³³ Northrup, 1989.

¹³⁴ Francis, 2002.

¹³⁵ Ryan, 2007.

¹³⁶ Kriesberg, 2011.

¹³⁷ Miall, 2004.

¹³⁸ Kriesberg, 2011.

Conflict transformation could be the only appropriate solution for complex conflicts, the whole nature of which is caused by internal factors. It fits to the context of Russia-Ukraine conflict where parties share historical and cultural past and have the potential to improve future relationships. Although there are signs that direct violence has declined and the situation in general has stabilized since the start of the conflict, it has come to the point where the attempts to find a solution from the outside with participation of both warring parties and international observers are doomed to failure. However, it is important to keep in mind that the process of conflict transformation from destructive to constructive is often uneven and asymmetrical. The parties usually transform at different paces, and progress is followed by regression and then progress again.

Within such constructed reality, it is crucial to build a dialogue between two warring societies not to decide whose story is more truthful, but at least to express different views, experiences and narratives. While narratives of the past provide anchorage for politico-cultural identities, they often represent the 'other' as a threat. Identity conflicts are thus fueled by discourses of historical enmity, hatred and polarization, which intensify the basic existential fears for group survival.

Although the conflict is far from being resolved, it is worth to think about possible post-conflict reintegration. Reconciliation is rather impossible because the underlying values for both groups are incompatible and cannot be quickly altered, if at all. Instead, some argue that Ukrainian politicians should think about accommodation: one group could manage to guarantee some autonomy for the other group, respecting its values. It is very unlikely that authoritarian Ukraine, modelled on Putin's Russia and epitomized in Donbas, can provide such autonomy for democratically minded, Europe-oriented citizens. The Kremlin-ruled Crimea illustrates actually the opposite. However, it is quite possible that democratic Ukraine could find a way to accommodate its paternalistic, Soviet-minded, and Russia-oriented Ukrainians.

Given that both sides of the ongoing Ukrainian war present aggressive antagonistic narratives, actively use historical myths and propaganda as the tools of a new hybrid warfare, it is possible to presume it belongs to the sphere of identity conflicts. Typical instruments in such type of war are creating a new reality, where it is hardly possible to know the reality. The whole notion of the truth disappears in the often-contradictory media reports from both

warring parties, while the observers, not having the direct access to the battleground, can only repeat and multiply the information provided by the propaganda machine. A possible facilitation of the situation could be achieved through direct dialogue of the warring societies. Though no shared agreement may be reached, through the process of exchange people may become more aware of their own views and expand their understanding of one another.

Although most of studies on construction of identity put focus on official initiatives contributing to development of identity, it is important to note that ordinary people play a significant role in nation-building process. Construction and/or deconstruction of identity at the bottom level has the power to shift the official discourse. The authority of citizens is not limited with mere rejection or acceptation of certain political initiatives, but they are able to interpret and renegotiate these initiatives, as well as embed new meanings into various objects and practices contributing to nation-building in a spontaneous way.

3. Video dialogue between Ukrainian and Russian students

The first attempt to stop violence and to overcome misunderstanding between the parties in the Russia-Ukraine conflict with the help of the dialogue at the bottom level was made on March 11, 2014, when the students of the Kiev National Theater University uploaded a short video onto popular media hosting website Youtube.com, in which they addressed all Russian citizens and expressed concerns with the tensions in Crimea. They stressed the integrity of Ukraine and its legal right for the peninsula. Although the message had rather peaceful mood with appeals for peace and brotherly nature of the two societies, it did not generate any media attention nor any responses from the Russian side.

Almost a year later, a similar attempt to build a bridge over the mutual misunderstanding between the warring societies established by the national media were undertaken by the students of several Kiev universities. On January 27, 2015 they released a video message on Youtube, which quickly became popular. In their video the students shed light on what they believed had happened in Kiev during the Euromaidan events and what consequences it had had. They admitted sharing responsibility for what have been happening, so they decided to overcome the information barrier established by the both governments in attempts to influence the situation. In particular, they asked their counterparts from Moscow universities to join their efforts and to start questioning the information they hear and see in the news.

*"We stand on the opposite sides of the barricades, and the kilometers of misunderstanding lie between us. The tales about Nazis and Ukrainian nationalists lie between us... Both you and us will have to explain our children, why we have been shooting at each other and have done nothing to prevent the war."*¹³⁹

The message of the video was in line with the popular expectations in the society, which for the first time in Ukrainian independent history managed to challenge the corrupted regime and turn the official discourse to the Western direction, which by many seemed as the direction for development. Thus, the students applauded the events on Euromaidan as a shift

¹³⁹ Kiev 2 video

for the better, while critically appraised the Russian aggression in the East and its annexation of Crimea.

The video attracted mass media attention and generated a series of video responses from different countries. Among the first to reply were the students from Kaliningrad universities. In the video released on February 1, 2015 they strictly criticized the Ukrainian interpretation of the events and asked their colleagues to “raise an information curtain”. Every sentence expressed in the initial Ukrainian video was interpreted through the prism of official Russia’s position concerning the events in Ukraine. Thus, according to them, the Russian media presented the truthful picture of the events, the events on Euromaidan leading to the ouster of the president were illegal, the Ukrainian activists and the new government were responsible for the violence in the East, and the Crimean referendum and its following annexation was in frame of international law.

*You say that Banderites and Nazis are a tale. Are the victims of Maidan and bombed cities of Donbass being tales as well? You will have to explain your children why you were shooting to us. We have not raised arms against our brothers. We will not be ashamed of our history.*¹⁴⁰

A few days after the Kaliningrad video was released, the media agency Newsfront, which along with RT found financial support from Kremlin and is notoriously known as one of its major tools in the propaganda machine, released an appeal for all Russian students to film more video messages depicting the official point of view. In the period from February 5 to February 10, altogether 28 videos from all major cities in Russia were published on the official Youtube channel with the similar titles “The message of <City> students to the students of Ukraine.” It is not known who the people in these videos are, what terms were offered to them and whether they were paid or not, but all of them with rare exceptions look as they were directed in haste, without any sincere ideas and were guided with the same scenario or a set of key words. Among the main ideas expressed in those videos are the brotherly nature of the two nations, their common history (in particular the struggle against Nazi Germany during the World War II), legal status of Crimean referendum, absence of Russian military in

¹⁴⁰ Kaliningrad video

Donbass, the corrupted authorities in Kiev who are responsible for violence led by self-enrichment, the West and in particular America as the main enemy and propaganda generator instead of Russia, and finally the appeal for Ukraine to reject the Western political direction and unite with Russia against the common enemy.

Some students from Russia did not support this discourse and were willing to express their own opinion. As a result, a group of students from the Moscow universities took the initiative. In their video published on February 12, they expressed gratitude for the efforts of Ukrainian students to start a dialogue beyond the information curtain. As a start they accepted their guilt over the events in Ukraine, asked forgiveness and promised to do everything possible to stop the war. They also criticized the aggressive policy undertaken by Moscow in Crimea and its support of the tensions in the East. In the end, they agreed to support the dialogue with their Ukrainian counterparts.

*A huge gap grows between our countries, and we, students, will be the bridge over it. We are on the same side with you, because in an information war it is criminal to be on any side, but the truth.*¹⁴¹

Before heading to the practical results of above-mentioned initiatives and conclusions, it is reasonable to mention other video messages from the list. Thus, a group of students from Lvov universities tried to deconstruct certain myths about Ukrainian nationalists they supposed are believed in Russia. They argued there was not hate nor oppression towards Russians in Ukraine. They highlighted the brotherly nature of the two nations, but insisted on an independent path of Ukraine. Hence, they agreed to contribute to the struggle against misinformation.

Among other videos from Ukrainian students were those which were in the same mood as the videos published by Newsfront, but bearing the opposite, anti-Russian opinion. For instance, the students from Ivano-Frankovsk in their video put all blame on the Russian side, accusing Kremlin of framing and fueling the war, while the Russian people of following their authorities as “sheep”. Other videos of Ukrainian students hold rather positive mood. The students mostly appealed to build a dialogue in order to deconstruct misinformation

¹⁴¹ Moscow video

constructed by both sides within the information war. The videos from Crimea and disputed territories in Eastern Ukraine were either in line with Newsfront position, or expressed the will to stop the violence without accusing any side.

With a simple search query, altogether 44 relevant videos were collected. After the analysis, all videos were divided into 3 categories based on the region, and a video from Moldova and a video from the USA were excluded as irrelevant to the topic. The first category included 7 videos published by Ukrainian students. The second category included 3 videos from the self-proclaimed republics in the East of Ukraine and 2 videos from Crimea. The final category included 30 videos from Russia. All videos are presented in the Annex 1 with date of release, link, general mood of the message (anti-Russian, anti-Ukrainian, or generally positive), and the main ideas expressed in the message.

The analysis of the videos was made by answering 4 key questions:

Firstly, in identity-based conflicts symbols and myths become inevitable parts of identity, as they are the objects of mental representations and struggle over narratives and interpretations. They belong to the realm of perception and appreciation, of cognition and recognition, where different involved parties invest their interests and their presuppositions, and of objectified representations in things or acts. They become a part of various self-interested strategies of symbolic manipulation, which are mostly aimed at determining the representation that other people may form of these properties and their bearers. For example, the symbols represented in the Western Ukrainian videos reflect the reality created during the events of 2014 in Ukraine and later supported and developed in the official discourse. Thus, the first question is: What symbols are used in the videos? Are they constructed? What do they represent? What myths are supported and deconstructed?

Secondly, the language often serves as a tool to construct a particular version of reality with particular interpretation of events and personalities, which is constructed for particular purpose. The general experience of the facts supposes that they have a concrete existence in the world, but they are all brought into being through language. There are only numerous constructions of the world, thus, references to the truth and facts are only references to the notions based on personal interpretations generated by culturally and historically specific

factors. The application of language in this sense is the field where material objects and social formations obtain meaning and where the competing versions of reality are constructed in the service of interest and power. Thus, the second question is: What language is used in reference to such objects as the conflict, the events of 2014, the Donbass regions, the referendum in Crimea, and Russia?

Thirdly, with most ethnic Russians and Russian speakers living in the southeast, identity contestation in Ukraine has a significant regional dimension. Thus, the “Eastern Slavic identity” is based on identification with Russia, while the “ethnic Ukrainian identity” is based on distancing from Russia and identification with Europe. After Ukraine had lost control over some territories with dominant Russian identity, the official discourse in the rest of Ukraine started to juxtapose “victimized and peaceful Ukraine” and “aggressive Russia posing a constant threat to Ukraine.” Therefore, Russia in Ukrainian media and political discourse is depicted as aggressive and imperialist, thus emphasizing the differences in culture, political orientation, and values between the two states, while the new Ukrainian government is demonized in Russia-oriented videos. Hence, the third question is: What is the attitude of the speakers towards Russia and towards Ukraine? What are relations between Russian and Ukrainian nations in their opinion?

Finally, although the initial intentions of the students were to build a dialogue between the conflicting societies and de-escalate violence, the speakers expressed different ideas how these aims can be achieved, while some of the follow-up videos introduced alternative offers. Thus, the final question is: What is the purpose of the video message? What suggestions are expressed?

3.1. Western Ukrainian videos



Western Ukrainians videos on the map

The videos labeled as “Western Ukrainian” represent five different cities in Ukraine: Kiev, Lvov, Ivano-Frankovsk, Khmelnitskyi, and Vinnytsia. All of them geographically belong to the part of Ukraine, historically named as “Western Ukraine”.

3.1.1. Symbols and myths

The very first video released in March 2014, right after the shift of power in Kiev and the notorious referendum in Crimea, starts with the images of a boy playing blue and yellow piano in a street. The colors represent the official colors of Ukrainian flag, which along with the national coat of arms became crucial signs of Ukrainian revolution and Ukrainian identity. The next frames show a pile of burning garbage followed by a picture of local citizens reconstructing a destroyed brick pavement.¹⁴² All these frames depict the timeline of

¹⁴² Kiev 1 video.

Euromaidan. Initially it started as a peaceful demonstration against the foreign policy of the Yanukovych government. After the power was used to disperse the demonstrators, the protest escalated into open riots. At that time, the news channels broadcasting the events showed the pictures of piles of burning tires, barricades, and local militia confronting the official police forces. When the president fled the country and the new interim government came into power, the Maidan square was reconstructed. All these events are symbolically depicted in the first frames of the video message. Another significant symbol used in this video is a picture of the students carrying banner with antiwar slogans. As the video was released before the escalation of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the students as well as other Ukrainian citizens were concerned with possible aggression of Russia and its interference. At that time the conflict was not seemed as inevitable and people have been trying to prevent it.¹⁴³

Next videos, which were released a year after the first one, were created in the circumstances when the conflict has already escalated, while the new Ukrainian government constructed a new discourse aimed at nationalization and development of an independent Ukrainian identity based on the Western Ukrainian culture and narratives. While most students in the videos wore either neutral clothing or the t-shirts with the logos of their universities, which highlighted their adherence to the student community in general and to their educational institutions in particular, some of the students was dressed in Ukrainian national clothes, so called “vyshyvankas”.¹⁴⁴ In 2014, the government initiated the promotion of vyshyvanka, which contributed to its becoming a mainstream attribute of Ukrainian patriots.

Besides visual part of the videos, the symbols can be found in the words of the speakers. The first Kiev video ends with an extract from the most famous poem of Taras Shevchenko. The poet is known as the founder of modern Ukrainian literature and the Ukrainian language, as well as an active promoter of the independence of Ukraine in the 19th century. Thus, he has become one of the symbols of independent Ukraine. Another video from Ivano-Frankovsk shows students vocalizing a poem-message to their Russian counterparts. A quotation from the message says: “Here your father, or maybe your brother, aims at my mother and my

¹⁴³ Kiev 1 video.

¹⁴⁴ Kiev 2 video.

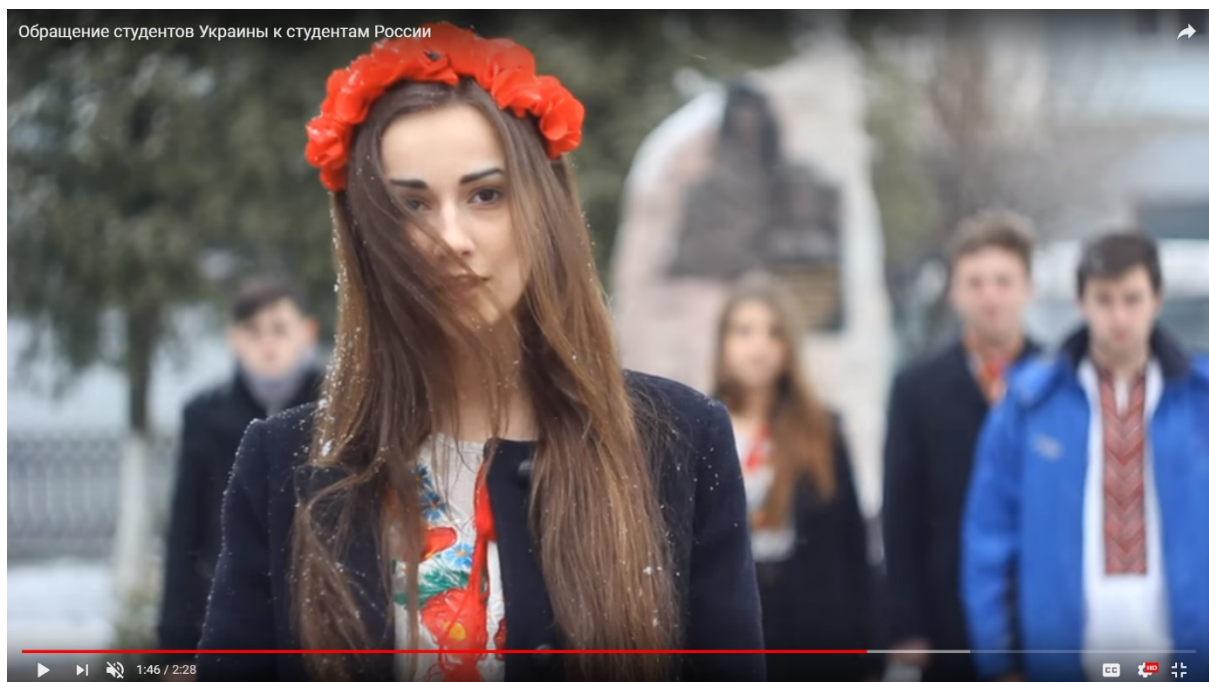
bride.”¹⁴⁵ The masculine image of an aggressor and the feminine image of a defender has been always widely used during many military conflicts in Soviet Union and earlier in imperial Russia. The world-known image of Soviet Motherland depicted as a woman calling up the population to defend the country against the German invader is the most vivid example. It is interesting how the idea develops in the Ukrainian context with now Russia serving as a masculine aggressor and Ukraine as a feminine defender.

Another symbol inherited from the Soviet times can be found in the video from Vinnitsa. In efforts to deconstruct some popular myths about “nationalist government” in Kiev, the students mention the annual parades and “eternal flames” honoring the memory of the veterans of the World War II. According to the students, these symbols signify that “nobody is forgotten, nothing is forgotten”.¹⁴⁶ The words firstly used by Olga Bergholz in her poem for a monument in 1959 became a symbol of people’s commemoration with the heroism of the Soviet soldiers in the war. Surprisingly, either group of students mentioned Bandera or the UPA in their videos. The Ukrainian government issued several laws, which granted the veterans of UPA who had collaborated with Nazi Germany and had fought against the Soviet regime during the World War II, with the same rights as the veterans of the Red Army. Moreover, it acknowledged Stepan Bandera, the leader of the Ukrainian anti-Soviet movement, as the national hero, and has been contributing to his promotion as one of the symbols of the Ukrainian independence. However, the students were not willing to embrace this new constructed symbol, and has chosen to keep the traditional memories and symbols of the War.

¹⁴⁵ Ivano-Frankovsk video

¹⁴⁶ Vinnitsa video

Ukrainian students wearing national clothes – “Vyshyvanka”



Some of the symbols reflect the myths and stereotypes constructed shortly after the conflict has escalated. Several video messages use such terms and notions as “fascists”, “right sector”, “Banderites”, and “junta”. These terms reflect the narrative constructed by the Russian propaganda machine in order to highlight the illegitimacy of the new government in Ukraine. They often can be found in the news of official Russian media, as well as in the commentaries and discussions about Ukraine in different pro-Russian sources of information. The Ukrainian students use these terms to emphasize the biased nature of Russian discourse and ask their Russian colleagues to avoid using this terminology. Indeed, application of such emotionally filled words and definitions obstruct building of a constructive dialogue. It seems that many Russians do not understand the constructed nature of this discourse, thus the attempt to deconstruct it through bringing it up into dialogue can contribute to deeper understanding of the antagonistic relations between the two societies.

However, some myths are also used in reference to Russia. Several video messages refer to the referendum in Crimea as a “referendum with rifles.” This phrase was constructed by Ukrainian media in order to highlight the illegitimacy of Crimean referendum in 2014. The popular discourse argues that local residents of Crimea were forced to vote for independence and further affiliation with Russia by Russian military present on the peninsula. Although the presence of the so called “little green men” in Crimea has been proven by several sources, their actual contribution to the results of the referendum is questionable.

Another highly negatively biased reference towards Russia can be found in the same poem video message from Ivano-Frankovsk. The information about the situation in Ukraine provided by Russian media is named as “the tales of the big brother”.¹⁴⁷ The reference to the novel by George Orwell is aimed to emphasize the totalitarian nature of the regime in Russia, as well as the absence of independent media. Although the work of the propaganda media in Russia is beyond doubt and the lack of democracy under Putin presidency is frightening, the comparison of the general situation in Russia with the society depicted in “1984” is exaggerated and reflects either the emotional bias of the speakers or the intentional attempt to depict the “aggressor” negatively.

¹⁴⁷ Ivano-Frankovsk video

3.1.2. Language and terminology

Although the videos from Western Ukraine mostly bear peaceful message, the language used by students often has negative connotation in reference to Russia, Yanukovich regime, and referendum in Crimea, while exalted in cases where Euromaidan and the new government are concerned.

Thus, while referring the events of Euromaidan, most videos use the term “revolution of dignity”. The term, being initially elaborated by Ukrainian former MP from Svoboda party Yuriy Syrotyuk, was supported and vocalized for the first time by his party fellow Oleh Tyahnybok during the riots in December 2013. The term hereafter has become a symbol of Ukrainian independence from Russia and its unique political course in the Post-Soviet space. Although the term is widely used in all Ukrainian media, as well as among the population and political elites, its usage in other countries reflects pro-Ukrainian position of a speaker. The substitute terms “Euromaidan revolution” or “2014 Ukrainian revolution” have more neutral connotation without introducing any attitudes nor opinions.

The bias of the video messages can be noticed in juxtaposition of the Yanukovich government with the Euromaidan activists. In the second video from Kiev, former Ukrainian president Yanukovich is described as a dictator and a failed president, while his presidency is depicted as “total corruption, unconditional rejection of European integration, censored media, and lawlessness of police”.¹⁴⁸ The riots on the Maidan are referred only as “peaceful protests”, while the actions of local police to stop the unrest as “bloody response”. Thus, the use of violence from the Euromaidan activists is justified with their “just cause” in struggle against the corrupted regime, while the response from the government is seen as illegal and abusive.

Since the official Ukrainian position concerning the annexation of Crimea and the separatist intentions of the Eastern regions claims that Ukraine is the only legitimate actor to possess these territories, the speakers in the videos tend to avoid expressing their attitude towards the citizens of these territories and the situation in general. Thus, Crimea is always referred as “autonomous republic of Crimea”, the official title of the region before the events of 2014. As for the separatist regions, the speakers use strictly neutral titles such as “the East of

¹⁴⁸ Kiev 2 video

Ukraine” or “Donbass”. Thus, there are no comments neither on who possesses the territories at the time, nor on what the intentions and reasons of the local residents are.

Moreover, it is interesting that the attitude towards the whole conflict is not shown in the videos. It is mentioned, however, that the fighting sides in the East include Ukrainian army and “Russian regular army”, while the local residents are called “peaceful citizens”. Thus, the locals are not seen as participants of the conflict. It seems that the speakers intentionally miss their role in the conflict in order to avoid any associations with civil war. On the one hand, it exculpates all responsibility from the locals and facilitates possibility for their reintegration and reconciliation. On the other hand, such position does not reflect the real situation, since the major contribution to the conflict comes from the local authorities, while Russia acts as their supporter with arms, volunteers and possibly army. In this sense, the dialogue is only possible if the position towards the Eastern residents is determined and their part in the conflict is admitted.

3.1.3. Russia and Ukraine

Since the Ukrainian identity has always been closely related with Russia, while the discussions whether the two nations are different, close or the same, the opinions concerning this matter expressed in the videos significantly differ.

For instance, in the video from Kiev of 2014, the students emphasize that the Russians and the Ukrainians are “one nation”. In order to emphasize the unacceptability of possible conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as to prevent its escalation, the speakers argue that together they are the “strong and mighty nation”, “united with common spirit”.¹⁴⁹

The video message from other group of students from Kiev released a year later, describe the Russians and the Ukrainians as “one nation before recent changes”.¹⁵⁰ Thus, they accept the closeness of the two nations, but the differences in attitudes towards certain issues have separated them. Such approach reflects the idea that after the Euromaidan, the Ukrainian identity has become closely bound with democracy and the West, whilst the Russian language, culture, and identity have become closely bound with authoritarianism and the

¹⁴⁹ Kiev 1 video.

¹⁵⁰ Kiev 2 video.

Soviet past. Thus, in order to emphasize the independent course of Ukraine towards the integration with Europe and to distance it from the course of the “aggressor state”, the two nations are depicted as separated.

These ideas go even further in other videos. For example, in the video message from Lvov, the close link between the two nations is explained with their Slavic origin and long common history, but their distinction is undisputed. Such approach excludes any other connections, such as close cultures, the Russian language spoken in both countries, and some part of the population being the bearers of Russian identity. Leaving behind all these factors and building the relations only on belonging to the Slavic family does not reflect the reality in Ukraine, thus it tends to alienate a significant part of the population from the official discourse. In this sense, such approach obstructs the constructive dialogue and might fuel the further escalation of the conflict.

If the attitude towards relations between the two nations differs in different videos and at least emphasizes their closeness in certain matters and distinction in others, the attitude towards Russia is generally common and negative. Mostly Russia is depicted as an aggressor with “imperial ambitions”. The scale of negative attitudes starts with the idea expressed in the Lvov video that “the Russians do not understand and do not accept another version of history”, and ends with the Russians being either sheep following their leader without having their own opinion, or the “rude nation”, which “has lost humanity” and “wants to destroy everything” guided with “hate and bloodlust”.¹⁵¹ In the Ivano-Frankovsk video “Russian accent and flag are associated with death”, whilst in the Lvov video Russia is contraposed to the “civilized world”.¹⁵² Thus, the speakers use the highly negative comparisons and language in relation to Russia, mock its values, and thus construct the demonized image, which does not reflect their proclaimed intentions to deconstruct myths, eliminate misunderstanding, and build a dialogue free of stereotypes and hate speech.

¹⁵¹ Lvov video

¹⁵² Ivano-Frankovsk video

3.1.4. Proposals

Since the messages and suggestions expressed in the videos differ, it is reasonable to mention all of them one by one.

The first Kiev video was made before the major events, which destabilized the relations between Russia and Ukraine, the main purpose of the video was to prevent the escalation of the conflict. Thus, the students asked their Russian counterparts to keep the integrity of Ukraine and to maintain peaceful relationships.

The second Kiev video has initiated the further exchange of videos, although it was not the initial aim. In fact, the students asked their colleagues to avoid the influence of Russian

propaganda and to start checking and questioning the information in media. They also expressed the will to compete in the Olympics and academic competitions.

The main aim expressed in the first Lvov video was to deconstruct the myths and stereotypes about the Western Ukrainians, which had been constructed by Russian media. The students also suggested to continue the “Marches of Peace” in Russia. This suggestion is the reference to the anti-war protests, which took place in Russia on 2 and 15 March 2014



March of Peace, Moscow, March 15, 2014

before the Crimean referendum, and later in September 2014. The demonstrations, which are believed to gather 20 000 people, were aimed at support of Ukraine and prevention of Russian interference. After the Russian government started the intense media propaganda, the initiatives stopped.

The video from Ivano-Frankovsk was the students' expression of their attitude towards the Russian aggression. The speakers did not offer any particular initiatives, but showed their negative attitude and asked to stop the interference into Ukraine's internal affairs.

The students from Khmelnytsky followed the voice of the second Kiev video. They suggested that the hate between the two societies in the Internet is constructed with provocations by "paid trolls" and aggressive policy from media sources. Thus, they asked not to follow the provocations and not to multiply hate. They also repeated the request to check and question the information provided by media.

The second video from Lvov was made as a direct answer to the Russian video from Moscow. They expressed gratitude for bravery of the students and expressed the willingness to join the efforts to deconstruct illusions and stop violence.

The video from Vinnitsa was made as a response to another Russian video from Kaliningrad. They claimed that Ukrainian nation is highly united and there is no civil war in the country. They also brought up certain absurd fake news from Russian media sources, as well as the facts that their city has been accepting refugees from Donbass. Such message can serve as a practical realization of the offer to start a dialogue expressed by the students from the second Kiev video. Moreover, they suggested to go beyond video messages and build an "information bridge" in order to continue the discussion online.

3.1.5. Conclusion

Since the videos were made by students from the Western regions of Ukraine, the assumption was that the messages had to be in line with the Western Ukrainian identity. The speakers wore the national cloths, which had been successfully promoted by the Ukrainian government as one of the true national symbols along with its flag and coat of arms. Meaningfully, the students from several videos used quotations from or direct references to Taras Shevchenko. The poet is recognized by the Ukrainian government as another symbol of the Ukrainian

nation and culture. The crucial distinction from the official discourse was the rejection of Stepan Bandera as a national hero and the positive role of the anti-Soviet Ukrainian movement during the World War II. The students decided to keep the traditional memories of the War, which are close to the Russian ones. Hence, not all the symbols, which the student referred to in their video messages, are adopted from Ukrainian official political discourse. Although most of the references to the symbols from the Soviet time are used either in neutral connotations as if they were common parts of Ukrainian identity, or in ironic negative way to highlight differences between Ukraine and Russia, the sacral significance of the War as part of the common Ukrainian and Russian history is secured.

The position regarding the Euromaidan is unilateral in all videos. Former president Yanukovich is depicted as a dictator with bad governance and is used as the main justification for the bloodshed occurred during the “revolution of dignity”. However, no evaluation of the new government is expressed. Thus, the Euromaidan is seen as a right deed, whilst its results are omitted from mentioning.

No dominant attitude towards the Russians can be distinguished from the videos. The attitudes range from highly negative, emphasizing the aggressive nature of the Russian nation and its lack of independence, to positive, referring to its closeness with the Ukrainian nation due to common past and close culture. Surprisingly, neither group of students emphasized the coexistence of two identities in Ukraine. The Eastern Ukrainian identity was not mentioned at all, while the residents of Donbass were not granted with any differences from the titular Ukrainian nation. The whole idea of two identities in Ukraine, which has deep roots and has been dominant in Ukrainian political discourse, as well as has played the key role during every election and has determined the internal policy of Ukraine from the time of its gaining independence in 1991 until the events of 2014, completely disappeared from Ukrainian official agenda. Hence, the Donbass became alienated from the rest of Ukraine, whilst the other Eastern regions lost their distinctness. It is hard to be certain whether it is the results of the Ukrainian unification against the common enemy, or just a total disregard of the identity issues in Eastern Ukraine.

However, the attitude towards Russia is unanimously negative. Most videos referred to it as an “aggressor state” with imperial ambitions. Russia is also referred as the main initiator and

one of the two warring parties in the Donbass conflict along with Ukraine. Thus, local citizens are not seen as the participants of the conflict, and are depicted as the victims of the Russian aggression. Moreover, the signs of civil war are either avoided or intentionally omitted, hence the guilt for violence is put exclusively on Russia.

The position towards Crimea is fragmented. If the referendum is unanimously seen as illegal and forced by the Russian army, hence the region is considered to remain the integral part of Ukraine, the Crimeans are not recognized as direct participants of decision-making in the region. There are no articulated speculations about their motifs and opinions. Thus, the fact of the referendum is referred to as illegal with alleged violations, but there are no suggestions either for an additional referendum with international observers in order to make it legal, or for any other solutions of the problem.

Thus, in general, the identity represented by the Western Ukrainian videos can be described as Western Ukrainian, but the students expressed certain disagreements with the official discourse of their government, especially concerning the narratives of the World War II.

3.2. Eastern Ukrainian videos



Eastern Ukrainian videos on the map

3.2.1. Symbols and myths

The cities, where Eastern Ukrainian videos were made, are officially considered to be a legitimate part of Ukraine. For many years during the Soviet times and after Ukraine gained independence in 1991, the residents of this regions identified themselves as Ukrainians. Although their identity was different from the other parts of Ukraine, they were legitimate bearers of Eastern Ukrainian identity. The differences included Russian as the main communication language, close cultural and historical ties with Russia, the shared historical narrative, which put more significance to the common past, shared achievements and tragedies during the Soviet times and excluded the significance of Ukrainian struggle for independence, and the vision of Ukrainian development course in close association with Russia, instead of Europe. Notably, all these differences did not prevent Eastern Ukrainians from active participation in Ukrainian political life, and significantly contribute to its foreign

policy decision-making processes. However, the speakers of the Eastern Ukrainian videos seem to have lost their Ukrainian self-identification and have alienated from other parts of Ukraine.

Such symbols, which were present in the Western Ukrainian videos, as national cloths, Ukrainian flag and coat of arms, and respect for Ukrainian artists and war heroes are totally missing in the Eastern Ukrainian videos. However, there are no signs of any alternative national symbols, such as Russian or local flags or historical figures. Thus, it is possible to assume that the speaker has lost their former identification with Ukraine, but have not gained any alternative identities.

The only visual symbols, which could be noticed in the videos, are the student cards. The students from Donetsk have questioned the student identities of the speakers from the second Kiev video, suspecting them to be actors hired by Ukrainian authorities. This assumption was quite common in the commentaries to the video. Moreover, there were several published videos, where speakers tried to prove the fake nature of the Ukrainian video. Although all the “proofs” were fabricated, the popularity of such videos along with huge amount of commentaries supporting this idea (which were probably left by so-called “paid trolls”) have contributed to its spread. The student cards shown in the Donetsk video are supposed to prove the independence and neutrality of the speakers. Thus, the speakers identify themselves mostly with the international “student brotherhood”, leaving behind national or local identities.¹⁵³

All videos put much significance to the symbolism of the Ukrainians being among the active participants and victors in the World War II. Thus, the references to the war can be found in most of the videos, but the context and connotation differ in different cases. For example, the speakers from the first Lugansk video, compared the situation in their city with the “horrors of the World War II”, which they believed would never happen again.¹⁵⁴ This reference is rather neutral by itself and can be used just to describe with comparison the destruction the city has suffered because of the conflict, but in the context where the speakers blame Kiev for initiating the civil war in the East, such reference can be seen as

¹⁵³ Donetsk video

¹⁵⁴ Lugansk video

comparison of Ukrainian authorities with Nazi Germany. The reference goes even further in the video from Sevastopol. The speakers blame the Ukrainians for “betraying the ancestors, who sacrificed their lives in the Great Patriotic War”.¹⁵⁵

Although the Eastern Ukrainian students attempted to deconstruct some of the myths exposed in the Western Ukrainian videos, by doing this they nourished their own myths. For example, the students from Sevastopol referred to the myth that residents of the regions, which are under influence of the Russian media, are brainwashed. However, in their turn they emphasized that all the Ukrainian media are corrupted and serve for Ukrainian propaganda. They also claimed the Ukrainians to be under significant influence of the “oversea president”. This is a clear reference to the myth that the United States played a crucial role in plotting the Euromaidan protests, which has been constructed and distributed by the Russian media in order to emphasize the confrontation of Russia and the West.

3.2.2. Language and terms

The Western Ukrainian videos were distinguished with giving much symbolism to the events of Euromaidan as the key turn in the Ukraine’s path to the development, addressing the Crimea referendum as illegal and forced by Russia, and while having no clear terminology how to define the situation in the Eastern regions avoiding the notions of civil war and putting all blame for violence to Russia. The Eastern Ukrainian videos have the opposite characteristics.

Thus, the ouster of president in Kiev during the Euromaidan is referred as “overthrow of legitimate power.” This matter has a complex structure, and there cannot be one objective opinion. On the one hand, actual president Yanukovych concerned with personal security and being afraid for his own life has left the county and could not fulfil his duty as the president of Ukraine. On the other hand, revolution cannot be legitimized, as it is not mentioned in the Ukrainian constitution, as it is not mentioned in constitutions of any other countries. Thus, the reference to the events in Kiev as illegal does not contradict the Constitution of Ukraine. However, this fact was somehow lacking in the Western Ukrainian videos. Still, the situation is quite complex, and different law experts express different opinions in this regard. Nevertheless, the speakers in the Eastern Ukrainian videos do not provide any expert

¹⁵⁵ Sevastopol video

argumentation, but give an emotionally biased opinion. For example, the students from Crimean video refer to these events as “bloody coup”. If the Western Ukrainian students saw the Euromaidan as the “revolution of dignity”, which resulted in overthrow of a dictator, who led the country to total corruption, censored media and lawlessness of police, the Eastern Ukrainian students describe the results of the Euromaidan as “war, increase in crime, impoverishment of population, and sharp decrease of living standards.”

Concerning the referendum in Crimea, all videos support a similar opinion, which contradicts to the description of “referendum with rifles” expressed in Western Ukrainian videos. Thus, the students from Sevastopol, who claim to participate in the referendum themselves, describe it as their “mutual voluntary and conscious choice” and argue that “the absolute majority of Crimean residents sincerely desired the historically just return of the Crimean peninsula to Russia”.¹⁵⁶ The students from Crimea in their video message claim to eyewitness the “tears of joy” in the eyes of the Crimeans, who congratulated each other with “coming back home to Russia”.¹⁵⁷ Although the role of Russia in the referendum is beyond doubt and considering the fact that the speakers in the video do not contest it, it is reasonable to suggest that the words of local citizens have more power than the opinion expressed in other parts of Ukraine. Thus, these messages can significantly contribute to the deconstruction of myths and provide a ground for a constructive dialogue. However, the “historical justice” of the return is doubtful and seems to be just another myth constructed during the conflict.

In general, all Eastern Ukrainian videos tend to juxtapose the Crimean referendum with the “revolution of dignity” in Kiev. Besides the above mentioned negative economic consequences of the Euromaidan, the whole revolution is described as violent, leading to mass casualties and “crippled innocent citizens”, in comparison to “peaceful and freewill” referendum. Moreover, the results of the two “revolutions” are contraposed. If the Crimean referendum is argued to lead to “peace and tranquility”, the results of Euromaidan are long-lasting protests. The “burning tires”, which served as a symbol of people’s uprising against corruption and their manifestation of dissatisfaction with the corrupted regime in the Western Ukrainian videos, had a negative connotation in the eyes of Eastern Ukrainians, and

¹⁵⁶ Sevastopol video

¹⁵⁷ Crimea video

were compared with symbolic “children playing in playgrounds” and “seniors spending evenings relaxing on benches” in Crimea.¹⁵⁸

The attitude towards the conflict in East of Ukraine expressed by the Eastern Ukrainian students also significantly differs from the opinions of their Western counterparts. All the blame for violence is put on the Kiev authorities. Thus, they are blamed for “drowning prosperous regions of Ukraine in blood and destroying tens of thousands innocent people” because “they had different opinion”. The conflict itself is referred no other than “civil war”. Both students from Lugansk and Donetsk said they had not wanted any war, while Kiev had brought war to them and called local people terrorists. The Ukrainian army is described as “punitive”, killing women, children and seniors. Moreover, if there were not any distinctive reference to the disputed regions in the Western Ukrainian videos, the Eastern students mentioned that Ukraine “had lost Crimea and Novorossiia”.

3.2.3. Russia and Ukraine

It seems that the symbols and myths, as well as the language and terminology, which were used in the Eastern Ukrainian videos, fully correspond with the ones common in Russian and, hence, inherent to the Russian identity. However, in reference to the Ukrainians, the position of the Eastern students is unique and distinctive.

Still, some videos use neutral references while describing the relations between the Russian and Ukrainian nations. For example, the students from Sevastopol emphasize the “common history, common victories and common tragedies” of the two nations, and claim that the West is afraid of the “unity of two Slavic peoples”.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, they end their video with the message that “the Ukrainians are still considered to be friends” to them, despite the latest events. Hence, they differentiate the two nations, although considering them to be close. Thus, the speakers in the video are the bearers of the clear Russian identity, and relate themselves only with Russia, not with Ukraine. Therefore, the residents of Crimea do not see themselves as Ukrainian, although such attitude was common even before the referendum.

¹⁵⁸ Crimea video

¹⁵⁹ Sevastopol video

However, the students from Lugansk and Donetsk have a different opinion. For example, the speakers from the first Lugansk video do not take either side and identify themselves with their region. They do not claim to be Russian nor Ukrainian, but emphasize their student identity. Hence, they seek to be politically indifferent, but criticize conflict and blame Kiev for destroying their city.

The students from the Donetsk video also identify themselves with the student community. Although they do not express their clear relations with Ukraine, they neither identify themselves with Russia, nor emphasize any other distinctive identity. However, they argue that the Ukrainian nation has divided into “those who look towards the West and those who look towards the East”.¹⁶⁰ Hence, their identity is mostly localized, but in close relation with Ukraine.

A student from the second Lugansk video, who served in Ukrainian army before the conflict, says that the people from Donbass, Central Ukraine and Western Ukraine are one nation. He was surprised to be attacked by his own people, and decided to join the local military forces in order to protect his family and friends from Kiev aggression. Thus, he identifies himself as Ukrainian, and a participant of the civil war on the side of his local region.

Thus, there is a distinctive difference between identifications in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. If the Crimeans see themselves as Russian, without emphasizing their residence, the Eastern Ukrainians consider themselves to be the bearers of Ukrainian identity, who are forced to protect their region from the Kiev aggression. Hence, the residents of Donetsk and Lugansk see the conflict as a civil war, which was initiated by Ukraine. They do not take any responsibility for the violence, and they do not mention Russia as being among the participants of the conflict.

3.2.4. Proposals

The aims expressed in the Eastern Ukrainian videos differ in every particular case, thus it is reasonable to mention all the suggestions.

¹⁶⁰ Donetsk video

The students of the first Lugansk video say that they have been trying to be politically indifferent, but concerned with the fact that their alleged opinions are expressed by different sides, they decided to vocalize their attitude towards the situation and deconstruct some myths. Thus, they described the gravity of life in a conflict area and their constant fear of the military actions. They claimed they did not want any war, but being put into this situation, they chose not to leave their home and decided to help each other to survive and bring peace to their city. Thus, their message is aimed to show their view of the situation, and they asked their Western Ukrainian counterparts to doubt the information they receive and to “check the truthiness of their own words”.

The students of the Crimean video tried to deconstruct the myth expressed in the Western Ukrainian videos that the Crimean referendum was forced by Russia. Thus, they claimed to be the witnesses of the referendum and emphasized its peaceful and freewill nature. As a proposal, they asked the Ukrainians to visit Crimea in order to compare its peacefulness with unstable Ukraine.

The invitation to visit their region was also articulated in the video second Lugansk video. However, the whole aim of the video message and the invitation was to prove the civil war nature of the conflict, as well as to show the destructions caused by the military actions conducted by the Ukrainian army. However, the true reasons of such invitations are unclear. It is well known that the Ukrainian government has issued the order, according to which it is not allowed to enter Crimea from the Russian territory, while the entrance from Ukraine is impossible due to the annexation by Russia. Similarly, it is not possible to enter the occupied regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, because of the military actions in the area. Thus, the invitations are meaningless and serve only as provocation.

Although the students from Sevastopol throughout their video message blamed Kiev for rejection of all relations with Russia, escalation of military conflict and destructive course of the new Ukrainian government, they appealed to build a constructive dialogue in order to retain brotherly relations between the two nations.

The students from the Donetsk video criticized the antagonism caused by the conflict and asked not only their Ukrainian counterparts, but the international student community to be constructive and not destructive.

3.2.5. Conclusion

As it was initially assumed, the students from the Eastern Ukrainian videos did not represent one distinctive identity. Although in their messages they used similar references and expressed rather common opinions on particular events, the key messages significantly differed in the videos from the Eastern regions of Ukraine and in Crimea.

Both regions used the recurring references to Ukraine's and Russia's common history with particular emphasis being put on the united actions of the Soviet army against the common enemy in the World War II. However, it was probably the only mentioning of the closeness between the two nations.

The most unanimous opinion was expressed regarding Ukraine. Both regions sharply criticized the overthrow of the elected president during the "illegal" events of Euromaidan and accused the new government of initiating the civil war in Ukraine. For the residents of Donbass, the conflict was in the core of the message, as the military actions concerned them directly. Although they neither denied nor approved their adherence to Ukraine and their Ukrainian identity, the war was depicted as direct aggression of the Ukrainian government against their own people. The Western Ukrainians were blamed for bombing the peaceful cities and killing innocent civilians for having unfavorable opinion. Although, the students did not mention their distinction from their Western compatriots, the idea of them having "different opinion" implicated the unarticulated Eastern identity. Without having clearly understood their self-identification, they used alternative identities in order to distinguish themselves from the rest of Ukraine, such as "student brotherhood", or local identity, or the citizens of their regions and cities.

For the residents of Crimea, the nature of the conflict in Donbass did not played the key role, as they referred to it only to highlight the atrocities of the Ukrainian army. In their case, the emphasis was put on the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum. They expressed unilateral satisfaction and relief with its results, and even referred to it as "historical justice". Using such

notion implies their close adherence with the Russian identity. They did not express any relation with Ukraine, while Russia was mentioned as their native land despite the fact of Crimea being part of Ukraine for 60 years.

3.3. Russian videos

As the division of videos was made on the basis of their regional origin, all videos uploaded by students from Russia were included in the category “Russian videos”. We remember that in case with the videos included in the Western and Eastern Ukrainian categories, the main message was in certain extent common, whilst the speakers represented a common Western Ukrainian identity in the Western videos, some evolved version of the Eastern Ukrainian identity in the videos from Lugansk and Donetsk, and a typical Russian identity in Crimean videos. However, if 28 out of 30 Russian videos can be united in one category as similar, two remaining videos from Kaliningrad and Moscow are quite distinctive, although bearing opposite messages. Thus, the analysis of the Russian videos will be structured in a different way. Firstly, there will be the analysis of the video from Kaliningrad, which will be done in comparison with the second Kiev video. Then there will be a separate section for 28 Russian videos, which have a bunch of similarities with the Kaliningrad video, but have one significant distinction. One more separate part will be dedicated to the Moscow video, followed by the conclusion section.

3.3.1. Kaliningrad video¹⁶¹

The video from Kaliningrad was the first answer to the initial video from Kiev. The students carved out the key messages from the Ukrainian video and directly answered to them, expressing their opinion on the subject. Thus, it will be interesting to see, how their interpretation of various events and ideas differs from the ones, expressed by Ukrainian students.

First, the Ukrainian students say that “a war is going on” in their country, while Russian and Ukrainian soldiers, along with peaceful civilians are dying. Here the speakers imply the external nature of the conflict by putting the “Russian soldiers” prior to any other participants. This reflects the official Ukrainian state position, which defines the conflict as Ukraine

¹⁶¹ Kaliningrad video

defending its territory and independence from the Russian aggression. The Russian students answer with the claim that the conflict is a “civil war”, whilst “regular Ukrainian citizens including children, elders and women are dying”. Thus, the answer does not mention any other participants in the conflict besides Ukrainian citizens. Such approach follows the Russian political discourse, which rejects any role of Russia in the conflict beside its support of local citizens with humanitarian aid. Moreover, by mentioning vulnerable groups of the population without explaining the reasons for violence, it implies the negative connotation to the whole situation, depicting Ukrainian government as producing violence with no cause.

Second, the Ukrainian students say that the Russian and Ukrainian nations were united until the recent events. In their opinion, the division is caused by the constructed myths such as “fairytales about fascists, Ukrainian nationalists, right sector, and Banderites”, which act as “information noise”. The Russian students do not embrace the attempt to deconstruct certain myths, which are ubiquitously present in Russian media. Instead they bring up some facts, which do not deconstruct the above-mentioned myths, but provide new ground for demonizing Ukraine and fueling the hate. Among the facts were mentioned the victims of Euromaidan, the notorious events in Odessa, and bombing of Eastern Ukrainian cities. The data about the injured and killed people during the uprising on Euromaidan is proved and easily accessible. However, the versions on who is responsible for the violence differ in Ukrainian and Russian discourses. If Kiev accuse former president Yanukovych of using military forces to stop disorders, Moscow put the blame on anti-governmental activists for using home-made explosives against the police. At the same time, the Kaliningrad students emphasize the brotherly nature of the two nations, and claim that “nothing can tear their blood ties apart”, which in the context sounds more intimidating than uniting.

Third, the Ukrainian students present the timeline with the cause-and-effect relationship of the events happened in Kiev in 2014. According to them, the rule of a dictator president led to “total corruption, unconditional rejection of European integration, censored media, and lawlessness of police”, which forced students to organize a “peaceful protest” action. The aggressive actions of the government were answered with countrywide uprising, which resulted in mass casualties. Hence, the “revolution of dignity” united Ukrainian people in their “fight for rights and freedoms”. The Russian students answered with their vision of the situation. The “peaceful protests” are described as “anti-constitutional coup”, a “dictator” as

“the president, elected by the Ukrainian people”, “total corruption” is compared with “thieves and criminals in the parliament” and an “oligarch” in power, the “revolution of dignity” resulted in “thousands of victims”, and “the united Ukrainians” fighting in a “civil war”. This part is a clear example how the same events can be seen contradictory by different actors. Although such juxtaposition of the facts and their interpretations looks like a typical axiological confrontation between antagonistic societies, it significantly contributes to a dialogue.

Similar axiological confrontation takes place regarding the Crimean referendum. If the Ukrainian students describe the chain of events as “the autonomous republic Crimea, being a territory of independent Ukraine, fills up with Russian regular army and undertakes a referendum with rifles”, the Russian side refers to it as “democratic elections under protection of little green men”. The “protection” is justified with an attempt to prevent “bloody chaos”, which the Ukrainian government allegedly caused in Donbass. Several interesting aspects are mentioned by both sides. On the one hand, the students of both countries refer to the facts, which do not contradict to each other. Thus, for example, the Ukrainians emphasize legal adherence of Crimea to Ukraine, the fact, which is not mentioned, but either it is rejected by the Russians. At the same time, either part denies the presence of Russian military during the referendum. On the other hand, the interpretation of the events articulated by the students from Kaliningrad surprisingly differs from the official Russian discourse. The difference will be further elaborated in the next part, which will be dedicated to analysis of other Russian videos.

While explaining the reasons for the sanctions, which were imposed by certain European countries and the USA, both parties tend to articulate with popular myths, constructed by their governments. Thus, the Ukrainian students first mention “world-wide conspiracy against great and sacred Russia”. The language is full of irony, but their own argument is as far from being reasonable as the one they are mocking. According to them, “Europe and America consider human life as the highest value”, hence the sanctions are motivated by the need to protect this value in Ukraine. Such explanation probably reflects the official European position on the sanctions announced on political level, but does it really cover the underlying reasons for them? However, the answer from the Russian students is beyond any official positions and belongs to the realm of speculations and bare populism. They claim that “Russia is the only

country fighting for democracy”, whilst the USA and Europe arrange revolutions and attack sovereign states, such as Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya. Although such exchange of opinions only fuel antagonism and fakes, it is still part of dialogue.

Another unpredictable argument can be found in the end of both videos. There, the Ukrainian students argue that both countries are responsible for the conflict and they must be ashamed of such “common history”. Although by addressing the “common history”, the students do not refer to the Ukraine’s and Russia’s common past, but to the events where both countries participate, it still can be seen as an attempt to draw together two antagonistic societies. However, the Russian students tend to abstract from Ukrainian history. They say that “they will not be ashamed of THEIR history”, thus, they distance from the ideas about historical integrity and interdependence of the two countries, which are quite popular in Russian media.

3.3.2. Newsfront and Moscow video

After the video from Kaliningrad was released on the 1st of February 2015, information portal Newsfront launched an appeal in its social networks channels for students from other Russian universities to upload videos with their views on the situation. Newsfront was established on the 1st of March 2014, in Crimea. The claimed aim is close to those announced by Russia Today, which is to spread an “alternative truth” in different countries. Although, the official page states that it is financed only by donations and advertising revenues, a former employee claims a large part of the budget comes from the Russian secret service.

It is not known what terms were offered to students for publishing videos and whether they were paid, but the appeal was answered with 28 different videos, which were published on the agency’s official Youtube channel during the period from the 5th to 10th of February 2015. Although the students speaking in front of their universities as well as the locations were different in all videos, the main message was suspiciously similar in all cases, and included certain theses, which will be analyzed hereafter. In general, it seems that the speakers were guided by a certain manual provided by Newsfront, and articulated what they were asked to, and not their own opinions.

First, the students emphasize the close connection between Ukraine and Russia. The references to common history are used in most of the videos. A particular emphasis is put on

the period of World War II. The speakers subsequently mention the contribution the Soviet army consisting of both Russians and Ukrainians has made to the victory against a common enemy. Some students elaborate on this idea by claiming that the “Slavic world was always standing against the West throughout its history”. The repeating message invokes the Ukrainians to confront their government and to support the Russian direction of Ukraine’s foreign policy in order to sustain against the Western threats. The notion of the “Western threat” is a remarkable reference, which is used by the Russian media in order to explain the reasons for the sanctions for the Russian audience.

Second, the Western countries, and especially the USA, are continually demonized by the speakers. Thus, America is accused of using propaganda in order to conduct information war and produce violence in Ukraine. The Euromaidan is described as a failure of Ukrainian people, which was organized and led by the American president. The antagonism between Russia and the USA, or sometimes the West in general, is the main motif in Russian political discourse. Without going deep into Russian political life, it is reasonable to mention that such ideological confrontation in the media had been essential during the Cold War, but lost its significance after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The return to it in the modern Russian media can be explained as an attempt to construct once again the image of the external threat and distract the population from internal problems caused by bad governance and sanctions. Since there is no point in constructing such image in Ukraine, it is reasonable to assume that the target audience of these video messages should be found not in Ukraine, but in Russia, and, perhaps, in Donbass.

Concerning the conflict in Donbass, the students refer to it precisely as civil war. The Ukrainian authorities, which are depicted as illegal due to unconstitutional entering the office, are claimed to be responsible for initiating the war. The citizens of Donbass “have made their choice” and now suffer from the atrocities of Ukrainian army. The repeated message denies the presence of Russian army in Donbass, while the emphasis is put on humanitarian assistance provided by Russia. Since the official Ukrainian position regarding the conflict is clear and determined, whilst the Ukrainian population tend to support it, it is doubtful that the Newsfront targeted them in these video messages. However, the message regarding Donbass can appeal not only the Russians, but also the international audience.

As a reaction to such unilateral criticism of Ukraine, a group of students from the Moscow universities published their own video message on the 12th of February. First, they expressed gratitude for the efforts of Ukrainian students to start a dialogue and come over the information curtain. As a start of the reconciliation process they accepted the responsibility of their country for the conflict in Ukraine. They also criticized the aggressive policy undertaken by Moscow in Crimea and its support of the “undeclared criminal war” in the East of Ukraine. Thus, they expressed the alternative vision of the role of Russia in the conflict, which significantly differs not only from the other Russian videos, but also from the messages published by the Eastern Ukrainian students. Even though their video stands against 29 other videos from Russia with the opposite message, it is vital that they showed the presence of alternative opinions in Russia. Indeed, although it is difficult to estimate the share of those Russians who support the official Russian discourse and those who criticize it, the fact that the absolute majority of the Russian videos supported it, does not reflect the real number of followers, as it is easier to express the position of your government than to oppose it.

Conclusion

Again, it is hardly possible to track how the exchange of video messages has contributed to the participants' perception of each other, and how their self-identification has transformed through expressing their own opinions and listening to alternative ones. However, by listening to what they have to say, how they continually address background context and interpret facts and personalities based on their beliefs framed by political environment, it is possible to identify the key disagreements in the conflict. The special relationship between thinking and speaking is the central part of successful dialogue. Addressing seemingly same matters leads to a deeper understanding between opponents. A dialogue, no matter how constructive it is, provides potential to break the boundaries of misunderstanding and misinterpretation between antagonistic societies, which contributes to conflict transformation.

Within the framework of conflict transformation dialogue, being the necessary link from antagonism to agonism, is mainly aimed at deconstruction of enemy images and narrative and construction of shared meanings and narratives. When dialogue is conducted as an act of sharing, it contributes to changing the vision of the other as the enemy. The aim of dialogue is not to find who is right and who is wrong or whose interpretation of the truth has more right to exist, but to discover that interpretations and opinions might be different, but equally essential and valuable.

Although, the initial target of the Western Ukrainian videos was the students from Russia, the response of the Eastern Ukrainian students and of the students from Crimea played a crucial role in exchange of opinions. Thus, the resulted dialogue shaped into an exchange of three distinctive discourses. In order to draw the line, it is important to look at how all three sides expressed their attitudes towards such key points in the Russia-Ukraine conflict as the events of Euromaidan, the common historical past of the two countries, in particular the times of the World War II, the referendum in Crimea, and the nature of the conflict in the East of Ukraine, as well as what was the expressed self-identification of the speakers.

The events of Euromaidan had a crucial symbolic meaning for the Western Ukrainians. They saw it as a unique example of unification of the Ukrainian nation in their struggle for a better future of their country. The use of violence, mass destructions and casualties during the uprising were unanimously justified by the right cause as the necessary small evil against the

bigger threat of a corrupted president. However, both Eastern Ukrainians and Russians expressed an alternative attitude towards the events. Remarkably, the Eastern Ukrainians chose not to join the excitement of their compatriots in regard of “the revolution of dignity”. The overthrow of the president was criticized as illegal, whilst the mass casualties of the uprising were put in blame on the new Ukrainian government with partial share of responsibility on the alleged Western interveners.

Surprisingly, despite the efforts of the Ukrainian government to construct new national symbols out of the nationalist movement of collaborators with Nazi Germany against the Soviet regime during the World War II, even the Western Ukrainians, who are often referred to as the most pro-nationalist part of the Ukrainian population, did not expressed any support for such initiatives. They repeatedly articulated in favor of the positive experience of the joint efforts of all Soviet people against the external threat and emphasized the importance of commemoration of their achievements. Thus, the myths of Banderites and nationalists, which were continuously highlighted in the Russian video messages, did not find any proofs in the words of the Western Ukrainian students. Since the memory of the Great War has the crucial significance in the eyes of the Russians, the opinion shared with the Ukrainians can be one of the common points for development of a dialogue.

Although the position of the Western Ukrainians towards the referendum in Crimea was opposite to the one expressed by both Russian and Eastern Ukrainian students, the attitude towards the local Crimean citizens were not defined by the Ukrainian side. They repeatedly emphasized the illegal status of the referendum, but chose not to comment on the opinions of the Crimeans and possible solutions for the situation in the region. Since two videos, which participated in the video dialogue, were published directly from Crimea, the expression of their motifs and opinions might contribute to a deeper understanding of the situation. Since the videos from Crimea were published later than the messages from Western Ukraine, it is impossible to track how effective they were for clarification of the situation, but the assumption is that if the initial declared aims of the Ukrainian students were to fill the gaps in the whole picture of the conflict, the messages from Crimea might serve for that purpose. However, the question remains, how willing were the Ukrainian students to actually hear the alternative opinions and how open-minded they were to accept the opinion, which stays in contrast with their own.

Concerning the conflict in Donbass, the participants of the video dialogue expressed three distinctive opinions. The Western Ukrainian students defined the conflict as an undeclared war between Russia and Ukraine with Russia regarded as the aggressor. The local citizens of the region are not seen as the direct participants, although they are described as victims. The Russian students denied any involvement of their country in the conflict and put all the blame for the violence on aggressive Ukrainian government, who used military force against their own people. The residents of Donbass defined the conflict as a civil war, where Ukraine is depicted as the aggressor, and the locals as the defending side. Remarkably, neither side chose to articulate their opinion about the reasons of the conflict. The Ukrainians explained the reasons with spontaneous act of Russian aggression guided by its imperial ambitions. The Russians and Eastern Ukrainians articulated similar spontaneous act of Kiev aggression against their own people. Thus, since both sides chose not to seek the root reasons of the conflict and expressed just the emotionally framed accusations, this might be a key topic of the further dialogue.

Thus, the ideas and opinions expressed by all participants of the video dialogue were not fully contradicting. Certain topics proved to stand on the common ground. For example, the significance of the World War II is unilaterally emphasized, whilst all parties see the citizens of Donbass as the victims of the military conflict. Moreover, there were the positions concerning certain other topics, which were not the same, but did not show radical disagreement. For example, the situation in Crimea emphasized the opposite attitudes towards the status of the referendum, but showed the potential to become the necessary topic for exchange of opinions, probably for finding some solution. However, quite many topics proved to be the core of misunderstanding and disagreement. For example, the attitudes towards the Euromaidan or the nature and the participants of the conflict differ significantly and cannot be easily changed.

In conclusion, it is important to say that within constructed realities, it is crucial to build a dialogue between two warring societies not to decide whose story is more truthful, but at least to let the parties express different views, experiences and narratives. The narratives of the past often represent the 'other' as a threat. The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is fueled with discourses of historical enmity, hatred and polarization. Both sides of the conflict promote aggressive antagonistic narratives and actively use historical myths and propaganda as the

tools of a new hybrid warfare. Typical instrument in such type of war is creating a new reality, where it is hardly possible to know the truth. The whole notion of the truth disappears in the often-contradictory media reports from both warring parties, while the observers, not having the direct access to the battleground, can only repeat and multiply the information provided by the propaganda machine. In this case, the video dialogue, although cannot be the solution to the conflict, can contribute to deeper understanding of the alternative opinions and to reduction of antagonism between the participants of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

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Annex 1. Table of Videos

| Country | City | Date | Link | Against Russia | Against Ukraine | General positive | Main ideas |
|-----------------|--------------------|------------|---|----------------|-----------------|------------------|---|
| Western Ukraine | 1. Kiev 1 | 2014.03.11 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QxvN0jUfa0 | --/+ | - | +/- | Brotherly nations. Need peace. Crimea is Ukrainian, leave it alone. Ukraine is integral. Quotation from Taras Shevchenko. |
| | 2. Kiev 2 | 2015.01.27 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPB-sZ4sVss | + | - | - | Check information in media. Russians and Ukrainians different. Euromaidan is good. Russian aggression in Crimea. West is good. Russia is responsible for violence. |
| | 3. Lvov 1 | 2015.02.01 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCi6Q3aLRfs | +/- | - | -/+ | Myths about Western Ukraine are not truthful. Russian is not oppressed, no hate. Different nations, but close. Russians believe in propaganda and produce hate. Need deconstruct myths. |
| | 4. Ivano-Frankovsk | 2015.02.10 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7uCK73eU--Q | + | - | - | As poem. Russia is responsible for war. Russians produce violence and propaganda. Don't trust propaganda. Leave Ukraine alone. |
| | 5. Khmelnytskyi | 2015.02.11 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gttk2IHHVYI | - | - | + | Stop aggression and negative discourse. Don't trust media. Somebody tries to provoke conflict. Be peaceful. |
| | 6. Lvov 2 | 2015.02.19 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uErfigm_ZMc | - | - | + | Answer to Moscow. Gratitude for bravery. Break hate with God's help. |
| | 7. Vinnitsa | 2015.02.26 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlyZGffzPAk | - | - | + | Need peaceful relations beyond politics. Ukrainians are united because of (civil?) war. Russian media are provocative. Build direct dialogue to exchange views. |

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| Russia | 1. Kaliningrad | 2015.02.01 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zn69mAzPwig | - | + | - | Direct answer to Kiev 1. Media is truthful. Violence in Ukraine. Euromaidan illegal. Crimea in peace. West is aggressor. Ukraine is responsible for violence. |
| | 2. Irkutsk | 2015.02.05 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SL6t68mdezY | - | --/+ | - | Brotherly nations. Don't trust western information. America produce information war and violence. Must be united, because one nation. |
| | 3. Yekaterinburg | 2015.02.05 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGLYxz2hxi4 | - | - | +/- | Western propaganda. Civil war. Slavic world against west throughout history. |
| | 4. Krasnodar | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOCThsAX0p8 | - | ++/- | - | Euromaidan is failure and was led by America. Nazi are national hero. Ukrainian authorities are illegal. Donbass made a choice. |
| | 5. Voronezh | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwTZ57jwz_g | - | + | - | Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Russia participates with humanitarian help. Crimea is legal. Common history, brotherly nations. Western propaganda. |
| | 6. Tumen | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4OfMrn47deg | - | + | - | Civil war. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. Ukraine must choose Russia. |
| | 7. Taganrog | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uunibsM-5OQ | - | + | - | Refugees from Donbass suffer from Ukrainian army. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. America produce information war and violence. Brotherly nations. Ukraine must choose Russia. |
| | 8. Omsk | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owdfm3iCo90 | - | + | - | Brotherly nations. Common history. America produce information war and violence. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Ukraine must choose Russia. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. Donbass made a choice. |

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| 9. Arkhangelsk | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrOpbmnpYe0 | - | + | - | Common history. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Donbass made a choice. Ukraine must choose Russia. |
| 10. Bryansk | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkBYKGEyGns | - | + | -/+ | Brotherly nations. Common history. Immigrant from Ukraine says his country got worse. |
| 11. Smolensk | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uX3sk_nUTDM | - | + | - | Brotherly nations. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Crimea is legal (witness). |
| 12. Altai | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yHBSocxLVNc | - | + | - | Civil war. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. America produce information war and violence. Common history. |
| 13. Oryol | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eb9hRZh-2FQ | - | + | - | Brotherly nations. No Russian army in Donbass. America produce information war and violence. Donbass made a choice. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Common history. |
| 14. Dagestan | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSWm2okNQQM | - | + | - | Common history. America produce information war and violence. Brotherly nations. Ukraine must choose Russia. |
| 15. Vladimir | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSvFE2_0k9I | - | + | - | Common history. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. America produce information war and violence. Brotherly nations. Ukraine must choose Russia. |
| 16. Cherkessk | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WOPosHTayPk | - | + | - | Answer to Kiev 1. Brotherly nations. Common history. America produce information war and violence. Common history. Ukraine must choose Russia. |

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| 17. Kursk | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mp9jSBgbx4 | - | - | +/- | Common history. Humanitarian aid. America produce information war and violence. |
| 18. Saratov | 2015.02.06 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHrU9T5vgNE | - | + | - | Answer to Kiev 1. Videos of conflict victims. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Common history. |
| 19. Ulianovsk | 2015.02.07 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8Aqe1w32kl | - | + | - | Common history. America produce information war and violence. Brotherly nations. |
| 20. Chelyabinsk | 2015.02.07 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXHQwa3xeN4 | - | + | - | Common history. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. Donbass made a choice. America produce information war and violence. Ukraine must choose Russia. Brotherly nations. |
| 21. S-Petersburg | 2015.02.07 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px1FgNpRs2w | - | + | - | America produce information war and violence. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Common history. Brotherly nations. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. |
| 22. Nizhnii Novgorod | 2015.02.07 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb8vwB9dKNG | - | - | + | Brotherly nations. |
| 23. Khabarovsk | 2015.02.08 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtQbEpyFwl4 | - | + | - | Common history. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. |
| 24. Istra | 2015.02.08 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8BL0BOHj2s | - | + | - | No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. America produce information war and violence. Brotherly nations. Common history. |
| 25. Kazan | 2015.02.08 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ6VR3oJHII | - | + | - | Common history. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Brotherly nations. Ukraine must choose Russia. |

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| | 26. Moscow 2 | 2015.02.09 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEn_abE829Y | - | + | - | Direct answer to Kiev 1. Media not truthful, but refugees from Ukraine are witnesses. Ukraine is responsible for violence. Crimea is peaceful. Ukrainian media and authorities are lying. Ukraine is in crisis and responsible for it. Doublecheck Ukrainian media. |
| | 27. Yaroslavl | 2015.02.09 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvRNJ_OYFgk | - | + | - | Common history. Ukrainian media and authorities are lying. |
| | 28. Lipetsk | 2015.02.09 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2HhEPLICHg | - | + | - | Common history. Brotherly nations. No Russian army in Donbass. Crimea is legal. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. |
| | 29. Belgorod | 2015.02.10 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpA1mniLfMO | - | + | + | Common history. Ukrainian media and authorities are lying. |
| | 30. Moscow 1 | 2015.02.12 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VklUdwiiuGE | + | - | - | Answer to Kiev 1. Apologies for Russian aggression. Russia is responsible for war, Crimea illegal. Media are provocative, must not trust. Need to stop war together. |
| Eastern Ukraine | 1. Lugansk 1 | 2015.02.03 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzF3HBKuejc | - | - | + | Saying truth. Want peace. Ukrainian media and authorities are lying. |
| | 2. Crimea | 2015.02.05 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqYazJazbWY | - | + | - | Crimea is legal. Ukrainian media and authorities are lying. Crimea is peaceful, Ukraine is at war. |
| | 3. Sevastopol | 2015.02.07 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxLuS1Seht4 | - | + | - | Crimea is legal. Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Ukrainian media and authorities are lying. Brotherly nations. |

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| | 4. Lugansk 2 | 2015.02.09 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2RdWSFhJ9I | - | + | - | Ukrainian authorities are responsible for war. Civil war. One nation in Ukraine. |
| | 5. Donetsk | 2015.02.15 | https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMD-wouC2AQ | - | - | + | Support both Ukrainians and Russians. Need to discuss what's happening. Don't build hate, think of future. |